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FAR ABOVE RUBIES

BY

F. G. TRAFFORD (MRS. J. H. RIDDELL).

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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FAR ABOVE RUBIES.

A NOVEL.

BY

F. G. TRAFFORD (MRS. J. H. RIDDELL),

AUTHOR OF "GEORGE GEITH."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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FAR ABOVE RUBIES.

CHAPTER I.

Gone.

It was a lovely morning, and every one was going to walk over to Fifield church except Laura, who had almost tearfully entreated to be left in charge of Lally.

"I love her as much as any of you," she said, "and still I have the least to do with her."

So it was settled that Laura should remain at home, and all the rest proceed along Berrie Down Lane, — up which we walked slowly and lingeringly in the first chapter in this book — to Fifield.

A large party — for, although the intended festivities had been given up, and no visitors were invited to Berrie Down Hollow, still, the Dudleys themselves made a goodly number — eight, including Bessie — who looked pale and tired when she came into the drawing-room, "dressed in all her best;" so shrieked Harry Marsden — and ready to go to church.

"Mayn't I go too?" asked that young gentleman, pulling at Heather's dress; "I'd like the walk as well as anybody."

"Do you think it is only for the sake of the walk we are going to church, Harry?" asked Agnes, virtuously drawing on her gloves as she spoke.

"How should I know? Bessie's likely going for the sake of the young men; that's what pa says takes all girls to church," answered the *enfant terrible.*

"Well, I daresay Mrs. Dudley will not object to your seeing whether that is what we go for," said Bessie. "I will brush your hair and put you to rights, for you are a perfect scarecrow now."

And thus it was settled Master Marsden should accompany the party; and Alick, home for Christmas, had not a chance given him of looking at Agnes to see how she took Harry's remark about the object for which young ladies went to church.

"What had taken her to North Kemms," he wondered; "whom could the man be they had met there? what his connection with Bessie?"

These questions Alick stood striving vainly to answer, while Master Marsden was being brushed and made look respectable by Bessie Ormson.

"I am as good as a mother to you, Harry," she said.

"I am sure you are; but that's not saying much," answered the boy. "Mine has always a headache, and is constantly telling us not to make a noise. Noise, indeed! Women can make enough noise themselves, when they want to."

"Do not say 'want to,' Harry, it is vulgar."

"No more vulgar than you are," he replied. "I shall talk as I like. What is good enough for pa ought to be good enough for you."

"It is a fortunate thing for both of us that I am not your pa, as you call him," Bessie answered, "for I should shake you to death some day. Now, are you ready, or are you going to keep us waiting all day?"

"You think you look so nice in that bonnet," Harry sneered, "that you want to be off like a flash of lightning. You are none so pretty, some people think, though Harcourt, as my papa says, does imagine there is nobody like you. Pa says he would not marry you. I heard pa tell ma so, not a week before I came here."

"I can't wonder at that," Bessie replied; "your papa probably finds he has married one too many of the family already."

But this side stroke Master Marsden seemed unable perfectly to understand; wherefore he asked Bessie what she meant; in reply to which question he received the information that "children should not ask too many questions; and that, if he intended going with them to Fifield church, it was time he got his cap and went downstairs."

In acknowledgment of all this instruction, Harry, pulling a face at Bessie, that young lady forthwith unceremoniously marched him off and gave him in charge of Cuthbert, who grumbled a little over the trust.

Human nature is much the same on Christmas as on any other day in the week, and every creature in Berrie Down — Heather herself not excepted — felt Harry Marsden to be a burden and a tax.

Never before — never, Heather thought, had Berrie Down Lane looked so lovely as it did on that morning when they all paced it side by side. She had not been out for weeks previously, and the very branches of the trees seemed to bend and greet her as she passed.

There were few leaves, and there were no wild flowers, yet the banks and hedgerows looked warm

and pleasant, the ivy was trailing over the sward and twining fresh and green round the roots of the elms and beeches; the spruce laurel put forth its glossy foliage between the bare boughs of the thorn, and its bluish-black berries formed a contrast to those of the holly, red and glowing in the sunshine.

Everything looked fair and lovely to Heather on that Christmas morning. Arthur had been so kind to her for weeks past, had never grumbled about Lally's illness, nor complained concerning the child having occupied too much of her time and thoughts.

Alick was back amongst them — not much changed by his sojourn in town — good, and considerate, and helpful as ever. He talked hopefully of a vacant situation in Messrs. Elser's office, which he thought Cuthbert might fill; and Heather's secret desire for many a day previously had been that when Cuthbert went forth into the world it might be under Alick's auspices.

She did not feel quite so certain of the one boy as of the other; she did not think that as Cuthbert grew up she could manage him without Alick's aid. He was more uncertain in his temper, less to be depended on in any way, weaker for good, stronger for evil than his brother. Altogether, Heather desired that Alick should have the supervision of him; and, behold, there was already a chance of the desire being gratified.

Then Lally was better; though not yet strong, she was certainly better, and the girls were well; even Bessie made no complaint, though Heather thought she looked a trifle pale in her pretty bonnet, made of violet velvet, which was about the most becoming

colour and material possible to the complexion of that young belle, Miss Ormson.

"What a shame, dear, that Gilbert is not with us," Heather had laughingly said the same morning, standing under the misletoe. "Let me kiss you for him."

"Kiss me for yourself, Heather," Bessie answered, colouring up to her very temples, "but not for him."

"And why not for him?" asked Heather.

"I will tell you to-morrow, not to-day," was the reply. "To-morrow, perhaps."

And then, irresistibly, there came back to Heather's mind that passage in "Elizabeth, or the Exiles of Siberia," where Elizabeth, repeating the word "to-morrow," sighs.

"You look pale, Bessie," Heather remarked, when they had almost reached the foot of Berrie Down Lane. "Are you getting tired, dear?"

"I do not feel very well," Bessie answered; "I think I will go back again, if you have no objection."

Immediately, every one offered to return with her, even Harry Marsden, who, being debarred from throwing stones at the birds, was beginning to feel weary of the walk.

"I do not mind going to church." "Let me walk back with you." "No, I will go." "No, you have not been out for ever so long." "Let me" — "me" — "me."

All of which polite offers Bessie declined, saying, "if any one insisted on returning with her, she should walk on to church."

"I am not ill," she finished, "I am only tired; when I get home, I shall lie down and be as bright by the time you come back as any of you. Good-bye,

— *au revoir!*" — and with that she kissed her hand, and commenced slowly retracing her steps — Heather turning every now and then to watch her progress.

The farther the distance between them became, the silenter grew Heather. She felt a nameless anxiety about Bessie, — an anxiety which she could neither conquer nor analyze, but which, nevertheless, increased until when, almost within sight of Fifield church, she remarked to her husband that she really thought she must return home also.

"I am uneasy about Bessie," she said; "the girl certainly did not look well."

"Pooh!" exclaimed Arthur, "she is only a little tired. It would vex her if you went home now; I should not think of doing such a thing, I really should not, Heather."

And so Heather was persuaded not to follow after Bessie, but go on to church.

"You will find her well enough on our return," remarked Arthur; and his prophecy proved correct, for Bessie met them at the gate looking bright and happy, and with as rich a colour as she had ever boasted mantling in her cheeks.

"Hollo! you've been painting," cried out Master Marsden. "Hasn't she, Alick? nobody's face was ever like that, without paint."

"Harry, I really shall have to write to your mamma if you make such rude remarks," said Heather, rebukingly. "And so," she added, addressing Bessie, "you do feel quite well again? I felt so uneasy after you left us that I should have turned, had it not been for Arthur's remonstrance."

"I am glad he did remonstrate," answered Bessie,

"it would have been a real grief to me if you had come home on my account. I felt a little tired, that was all, and I am quite rested now."

So, indeed, it seemed, for never had Bessie been so gay as on that Christmas afternoon. And she was very sweet too, as well as gay; she uttered no sharp speeches; she was ready to play at cat's-cradle with Leonard, and even refrained from scolding when Harry Marsden, who must needs take a hand in that scientific game also, tore her lace sleeve to shreds.

She made herself agreeable to Arthur likewise, talking to him, while Heather was upstairs, concerning London, and her father's business, and her father's anxieties, and the Squire's own prospects, as quietly and sensibly, her cousin subsequently declared, as her mother might have done.

"And I think, Heather, she must be very fond of her father," Arthur informed his wife; "for once when she was speaking about him, and how hard he worked, and of how little help her brothers were to him, her voice quite shook, and the tears came into her eyes. I had not given Bessie credit for so much feeling."

"She is a dear, sweet girl," Heather answered. "I am glad she did not insist, as I feared she might, on sitting up with Lally. She is completely worn out, I think. Did you notice how pale she turned when she was bidding us good-night?"

Other people beside Heather had observed this pallor. Mrs. Piggott, who, making a grievous complaint concerning Priscilla Dobbin's shortcomings and habit of always being out of the way when wanted,

was silenced by the sight of Bessie's wan face, and by Bessie's entreaty for her not to be hard on Priscilla.

"She was with me a long time, you know, Mrs. Piggott, to-day," she said; "I did not feel very well when I returned this morning, and Prissy put away my bonnet, and did a few other things for me that I was not inclined to do for myself."

"There, there, Miss, don't say another word, but go away to bed; you look like a ghost this minute; you have been trying to kill yourself lately, that is my opinion; but, please God, we will all turn round now."

"Where shall we turn to, Mrs. Piggott?" asked Bessie, with a smile, and then she re-crossed the hall and ascended the stairs to her own room, only pausing for a moment ere she went, to ask Alick if he would take a letter up to town for her on the following morning.

"It is to papa, and he will receive it earlier if you post it in London. Thank you. I will leave it on the hall-table to-night. Good-bye, Alick, good-bye!" and Alick imagined she pressed his hand tighter than ever she had done before, and that there was a very plaintive tone in her voice as she uttered that word, "Good-bye."

Later on in the night, when every one except Lucy Dudley, who sat up with Lally, was supposed to be in bed, Bessie stole into the nursery, "to have another peep at her child," she said.

"You ought to have been asleep long ago," Lucy remarked, rebukingly; but Bessie explained she had been writing to her father a very long letter on an important subject, which Alick was going to take to town with him.

"About your marriage?" Lucy inquired, and Bessie answered, "Yes."

"If we talk any more, we shall waken Lally," the girl added. "Good-night, Lucy — good-night, my bad child — my poor little Lally!"

And stooping, she put her lips to Lally's hand, which lay outside the coverlet, and kissed it softly. When she lifted her head, Lucy saw that her eyes were full of tears.

"Bessie, Bessie, darling, what is the matter?" she whispered, putting her arms round her cousin's neck, and striving to detain her; but Bessie gently disengaged herself from the embrace, and saying, "we shall waken Lally; there is nothing the matter with me," left the room — her face buried in her handkerchief, sobbing, sobbing as she went. Lucy would have followed her, but Bessie motioned her not to do so. Then, gliding noiselessly along the passage, she entered her own room, and Agnes heard the key turned in the lock.

Some hours afterwards, when Heather, as was her custom, came to relieve the watcher, Lucy expressed her fear that Bessie could not be well. "She cried so bitterly," the girl explained.

Hearing this, Mrs. Dudley went to Bessie's door, and quietly turned the handle.

Contrary to her expectations, the bolt was not drawn inside, and she stepped into the apartment.

In the darkness she stood, holding her breath and listening. Bessie was asleep. Heather heard the regular respiration of what she considered sound slumber, and felt satisfied.

"I do not imagine she can be ill," Mrs. Dudley remarked, on her return to Lucy. "She is sleeping

quietly enough now, at all events. Tell me, dear," she added, "have you heard any noise at all during the night? I fancied I caught a sound something like footsteps crunching on the gravel, and got up to see. Arthur said it was all my fancy. Did you hear anything?"

"No," Lucy replied, "nothing whatever. Bessie was downstairs again, you know, leaving out that letter for Alick to take to town; but she was very quiet. I do not think you could have heard her."

"It was my fancy, I suppose," remarked Heather. "I have felt restless and nervous all the night long. I was quite glad when four o'clock struck to get up. Now, go to bed, Lucy, or you will feel ill for want of sleep."

"No likelihood of that," Lucy answered, suppressing a yawn, however, as she spoke, and went off, leaving mother and child alone.

Sitting there quite alone with her little girl, the restlessness of which Heather had complained returned upon her with double force. She tried to read; she fetched her work-basket, and commenced sewing; she went and stood by the window looking out into the darkness, and longed for five o'clock, when there would come some sounds of life about the house. It was a still, cold morning, pitch dark. Not a dog barked — not a leaf stirred. The silence was almost insupportable, and Heather felt it to be so, as she left the window and returned to Lally's side.

Still, the child slept quietly; and now Heather's thoughts reverted to Bessie. What could be the matter with the girl? Why had she been crying the previous night? Why did she so persistently ignore Mr. Har-

court's very existence? How did it happen that the time for her marriage seemed no nearer now than it had done in the summer?

That Mr. Harcourt was a devoted correspondent, Heather knew by the evidence of her own eyes. Scarcely a morning passed without the post-bag bringing a long epistle from him to his affianced wife. Bessie's acknowledgments of these epistles were despatched at much longer and more uncertain intervals; but then Bessie did not profess to be a good correspondent. "She hated letter-writing and letter-writers," she openly declared; so that her negligence in this particular proved nothing. Besides, her time had been much occupied with Lally, and altogether ——

As she reached this point in her mental argument, Mrs. Dudley heard a sound as though a door were being softly opened and closed at the end of the corridor. With that nervous fear upon her, which seems so often the advance courier of some disaster, the messenger spurring on to tell us of the approach of misfortune, Heather went out into the passage and listened. Yes, there was some one moving stealthily and cautiously in the direction of the back staircase — a woman, for Mrs. Dudley could hear the skirt of her dress brushing against the wall as she stole along.

It could not be any of the servants, because they had no business in that part of the house; — their sleeping-rooms being in the roof, and access to those apartments only possible by means of the back staircase which opened out of the front kitchen.

There was a door of communication, however, between the long south corridor, where the principal bedchambers were situated, and the other portion of the

house; and this door Heather now heard close softly, as the first had done.

Satisfied that Bessie must be ill and about to seek Mrs. Piggott's apartment, Heather hurried after; but when she came to try to open the door, it resisted all her efforts. As a rule, the key remained on the side next the main staircase. Now, Heather found it had been removed, and the door locked from within. Not knowing what all this could mean, she went back to Lally's room, took a candle, and, descending into the hall, made her way along a passage which led in the direction of the offices. Crossing the front kitchen, she opened the door which led towards the back staircase, and there on the last step stood Priscilla Dobbin.

"What are you doing? where are you going?" asked her mistress.

"I was coming down to look at the clock, ma'am," answered the girl.

"You have just left Miss Ormson's room—is she ill?"

"No, ma'am, not as I know of. She told me last night to go to her room when I got up for a letter for Master Alick to take to town."

"And where is that letter?" asked Mrs. Dudley.

"On the hall table, ma'am, I believe. Miss Bessie left it there herself after she had wrote it."

"What made you lock the passage door after you?"

"Miss Bessie told me to, ma'am."

Heather could not understand the matter at all. She did not believe that there was a sentence of truth in the girl's statement; but what her object might be in speaking falsely, she was unable to imagine.

"Miss Ormson is awake, then?" she said, at length.

"Yes, ma'am—leastways she was when I saw her."

Without another word, Mrs. Dudley turned to regain the hall. She wanted to see if the letter were really on the slab, and then she meant to go to Bessie's room and ascertain whether or not Priscilla had spoken falsely.

The whole thing baffled Heather. But for the locking of the door, she should have thought nothing more about the matter; but what object either Bessie or Priscilla could have in thus cutting off immediate communication between the two parts of the house, she was quite unable to divine.

There on the slab lay Bessie's letter — a thick letter, for Heather lifted and held it in her hand for a moment; then she laid it down again, and ascended the front staircase, slowly and thoughtfully.

She had not reached the landing, however, before Priscilla was beside her.

"Ma'am — Mrs. Dudley," began the girl, "you can turn me out of the house this moment, if you like. I told you a lie about that letter. I did not go to Miss Bessie's room for it. Miss Bessie is gone."

"Gone!" Heather looked at the girl, and blankly repeated that word after her.

"Yes, ma'am; and there is a letter for you, please, on the toilet-table," at which point in her confession Prissy began to whimper.

"Don't do that," said Mrs. Dudley, almost angrily. "Go on before me to Miss Ormson's room, and be quiet."

Thus ordered, Priscilla walked along the passage, and, opening the door of Bessie's bedchamber, stood aside to allow Mrs. Dudley to enter.

Heather, as she did so, glanced hurriedly round

the apartment. There was no disorder, no confusion; everything looked precisely as it might have done, had Bessie been there—only Bessie was not there.

Heather went up to the bed, and put her hand on the sheet. It felt warm, and she turned to Priscilla, saying, interrogatively —

"She has only just left the house?"

"She went at one o'clock, ma'am."

"Impossible! I have been in the room myself since four o'clock, and she was sleeping then."

"That was me, ma'am; and I was not asleep. I heard you come in — I never went to sleep all night. I'd have given anything, ma'am, if I might have told you. I never was so miserable in all my life — and poor Miss Bessie, she were a-crying dreadful."

"Where is she gone?"

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Who is she gone with?"

"That gentleman as is so sweet on her."

"You don't mean Mr. Harcourt?"

"Lor'! no, ma'am; that other what she came back from church to meet yesterday."

Utterly bewildered, Heather stood in the middle of the room, confounded and almost stupefied.

Had any one come to her and said Bessie was dead, she could not have felt more shocked — more grieved. Under her eyes this thing had been going on — this deception from day to day, and from week to week — and she had never even suspected its existence. Her very servant had been cognisant of it; this girl, this false, cheating, untruthful Prissy Dobbin, had been persuaded by Bessie to conceal the mischief until it was too late to repair it. And Bessie, too,

that bright, gay, affectionate creature, was but a hypocrite and a deceiver! Mrs. Dudley felt this to be the last drop in the cup, and, covering her face, wept bitterly.

"Don't 'ee, ma'am," implored Priscilla, "don't 'ee take on so! Read what Miss Bessie says, mayhap that 'ill tell you where she's gone. The gentleman worships the very ground she treads on; and they would have told you, only something about his father, I don't rightly know what, prevented them. Miss Bessie prayed and begged him yesterday to let her speak to you. He wanted her, right or wrong, to go off with him then, but she wouldn't; she said she wouldn't spoil your Christmas Day, not for fifty husbands — she did."

"You were very fond of Miss Bessie?" Mrs. Dudley said, inquiringly.

"Main fond, ma'am," answered the girl. "I took to her from the day she talked to me in the field, and give I that harf a crown."

"Then don't go chattering about her having gone off with any one, Prissy. If you are fond of her, show your fondness by keeping silence."

And with that, Mrs. Dudley, first bidding Prissy stay with Lally, in case she wakened, went and roused her husband.

"Arthur," she said, "Bessie is off — she has eloped. What are we to do?"

"Bessie eloped — Bessie off! Heather, you must be dreaming!"

"I wish I were," answered his wife. "Is there any use in trying to follow her, do you think?"

"There might be, if we knew where she was gone," Arthur replied. "What does she say in her letter?" he added, noticing the paper in his wife's hand.

"She does not give a clue," said Heather. "She merely states she is gone to be married, and that, whenever her husband allows her, she will write again."

"Better call up Alick," suggested Arthur; and, accordingly, Alick was called.

"They have four hours' start," said the young man, practically, when he had heard Heather's story, "and their plans must have been well laid. I will follow if you like, but I think it is useless. They are in London by this time."

"What makes you think they have gone to London?" asked Heather.

"Because it is the only place in which to be lost," answered the youth. And the three stood and looked at each other for a few moments in utter silence.

A great blow had suddenly fallen on them, and they felt stunned with its force.

That such a thing should have happened there! that they should all have bidden each other good-night, without a suspicion of coming evil — and that this should have come to pass before morning!

Heather was the first to speak.

"And Mr. Harcourt, too — what will he say?"

"If he be a wise man, 'that he is well rid of her,'" answered Arthur. "She must be a bad girl — a bad, false girl."

"But, oh! so good to Lally," said Heather, deprecatingly; "and I do not think it was of her own free will she went now — I do not — I believe she was driven to it. Read her letter, Arthur — read how she says she tried to like Mr. Harcourt, and how her mother forced her on. If I only knew she were married, I could rest satisfied."

And so husband and wife talked on, while Alick, standing by, remained resolutely silent.

He would tell nothing about it; he would say nothing concerning the stranger they had met at North Kemms; he would not utterly destroy Heather's faith, and show her that Bessie had been a deceiver from the beginning. His heart was yearning after the girl, but he would not speak a word that could give a clue as to whom she had eloped with.

She had prayed him not to tell Heather, and he would be faithful to his trust. From him Heather never should know how false this girl had been — this girl with the lovely face, and the sweet, winning manners, which had gained her so many friends.

"The matter should be kept quiet;" each attributing different meanings to that expression, agreed as to the expediency of this course. Arthur said he would go to town with Alick, and take Bessie's letter on to her father.

"Then, Mr. Ormson can do whatever he thinks best," said the Squire; and Heather at once went to see that breakfast was got ready for the brothers before their departure.

"I wonder who the devil she can have picked up," remarked Squire Dudley, when his wife left the room; "you never saw anybody hanging about the place, did you, Alick?"

Very truthfully, Alick answered that he had not; but still in his own soul he felt satisfied Bessie had gone off with the stranger, who sat in the same pew with them, and restored Miss Ormson's prayer-book on that Sunday when he and his cousin walked across the fields to North Kemms church, talking as they went.

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Stewart's Proposal.

THE woman who would rule her household well, had need to be endowed by Heaven with almost every virtue. She should be quick to perceive and slow to act; not given to rash judgments, nor easily moved to anger. She should be patient and long-suffering. She should remember that she is an absolute autocrat in her small domain, and be merciful accordingly. Her servants are but after all as children, who have no claim to a parent's care and affection. She can take the bread out of their mouths, and, if they have been happy with her, drive them forth from Eden into the cold bleak world which is all before them; she can make or mar their futures; she can be lenient, or she can be harsh. She can be cruel — like the servant who, going out loosed from his lord's presence, seized upon his fellow-servant, crying, "Pay me that thou owest," or she can have compassion on their infirmities, remembering that the God of the whole earth has had compassion on her.

She can be hard and exacting, demanding full measure and strict change; she can hold the scales steadily, and if there be a feather's weight too little, cast them out; or she may be merciful as her Father in Heaven is merciful, and be very patient towards those who try her patience, and her temper, and her Christianity daily. She can be the model, managing, worldly mistress, or she may be the mistress which the

Lord shall approve when He cometh to His kingdom. She can resolve the whole question into one of work and wage, or she can go further, and strive so to rule herself, and those she has under her, that when the long account comes to be made up — that account between rich and poor, which will never be closed till eternity — the Great Judge shall say she has done her feeble best, that although only one talent was given unto her, it was not buried in the ground, but put out to usury, returning ample interest.

So far, this story has been written in vain, if any reader have failed to comprehend that Heather Dudley was one of those women, "the eyes of whose maidens turned unto her;" and it will, therefore, readily be conceived, that although many persons would have incontinently turned Priscilla Dobbin out of the house, and refused to sleep another night under the same roof with such a double-faced, artful little minx, Mrs. Dudley felt sorry for the girl and inclined to make allowances.

She had loved Bessie greatly, and she was but young. Her life was all before her, and Heather could not reconcile it to her conscience to mar it at the outset. She had her talk with the girl, during the course of which Prissy was, after the manner of her class, silent, and apparently sulky. Nevertheless, she departed from the audience-chamber red around the nose, watery about her eyes, and generally depressed in her spirits.

She had thought Miss Bessie's elopement a fine thing till "it came to the bit," thus she expressed herself; but when they mutually had that bit between their teeth she did not much relish the undertaking.

"She was to take me as her maid, mum," Priscilla informed Heather; "but he would not let her. He said she could send for me afterwards; but now, ma'am, if you'll let me stay with you, I would rather. I'll never even think about leaving you again."

This piece of information was imparted some weeks subsequently; during the course of those weeks, nothing had been heard of or from Bessie. Where she was gone, with whom she was gone off, remained as great enigmas to the family at the Hollow, as they did to her friends in town. From Priscilla, indeed, Heather gathered that the cavalier was tall, dark, handsome, and liberal; but this was but a poor clue with which to start on a search after Bessie, and so no one attempted to follow it.

She had chosen her own course, and her place knew her no more. All in vain, Heather looked for a letter each morning — no letter ever came. All in vain, Lally fretted after Bessie, and stretched out her arms for the pretty cousin who was gone no one knew where. Mr. Ormson advertised daily in the *Times* to B—ss—e O———n, without ever receiving a ghost of a reply. Mr. Harcourt paid "private inquiry fees," but still nothing came of all his searching. Mrs. Ormson, figuratively, washed her hands of Bessie, and scored her name out of the family Bible — a volume she never opened except upon high and rare occasions; the poor father watched his opportunity, and wrote the name in again, the first time Mrs. Ormson left her keys in the door of the cupboard where she kept this tell-tale volume of dates and ages. Dr. Marsden said he had always expected something of the kind, and Heather

almost began to hate this strange man who came in as chorus to every misfortune of the family.

"I knew she never would marry Harcourt," affirmed this clever practitioner, the first time he and Mrs. Dudley met after the occurrence; "the fellow must have been a fool to believe her."

"And why did you not think she would marry him?" asked Heather, meekly.

"Oh! her head was always running on a very different kind of husband to a struggling lawyer; and I only hope it is a husband she has got, and not a lover, who will be packing her home to be a disgrace and burden to her family some of these fine days."

"I should not think Bessie very likely to return to her family, whether she be married or not," Heather answered, a little bitterly. She could not help being a trifle short with Dr. Marsden, whose first-born was still at Berrie Down, a very thorn in the flesh of every member composing the household.

Never out of mischief, never still, always teasing, eternally prying about, listening and meddling, even Heather at last declared, if she only had the money to spare, she would rather pay for Harry's education than be tormented with him.

But there was an end coming to all such torments and discomforts — an end which found Heather but poorly prepared for its advent; and the beginning of this end was a visit Arthur received on the 2nd of January, from a tall, thin, grey-haired, hard-featured individual, who sent in his card as —

"Mr. Allan Stewart."

"Being at Kemms Park," he stated, after the first civilities had been gone through, "I thought you would

excuse my calling, and talking over a little matter of business with you. It is about that house in Lincoln's Inn Fields; you know, Mr. Dudley, we cannot purchase it from you. I am very sorry indeed, but such a thing is quite out of the question."

"Why?" Arthur demanded.

"Well, in the first place, the position is anything but desirable; and, in the second, the price you ask is prohibitory. Besides, what do we want with purchasing properties? we need only rent offices. It would be the merest waste of money for us to do otherwise."

"Mr. Black assured me there was not the slightest doubt of the Company purchasing my lease," answered Squire Dudley.

"Yes, because Mr. Black thought the management was going to be left entirely to him," was the reply. "Mr. Black now finds he was a little mistaken, and that, being mistaken, he led you astray."

"He was the originator of the Company, or else I have been greatly misinformed," said Arthur, defiantly.

"You have not been misinformed," Mr. Stewart answered; "but the originator of a company does not necessarily mean the proprietor."

Squire Dudley remained silent, digesting this piece of knowledge, while Mr. Stewart proceeded —

"We directors are not necessarily his puppets because he brought us together. Although he obtained our names, and qualified us to act on the board, he did not thereby obtain dominion over us, body and soul for ever. Evidently, Mr. Dudley, you are not a man of business, and you do not understand much about commercial matters — indeed, Mr. Black implied

that fact to me; therefore, as I happened to be staying with Miss Baldwin, I thought I would walk over, and have a little friendly conversation with you."

"Do you mean," asked Mr. Dudley, harking back to the original question, "that you absolutely refuse to purchase these premises in Lincoln's Inn Fields?"

"That is my meaning," was the reply; "if you press the matter, of course it will be brought before the board, Mr. Black, probably, acting as your mouthpiece; but if you take my advice, you will not press the point, nor have it brought before the board; for I tell you fairly, the line must be drawn somewhere, and at that point I mean it to be marked broadly."

"You are not the proprietor of the Company, are you?" asked Arthur.

"No; but I am the largest shareholder and the most influential man on the board," was the reply.

"And what do you think of the scheme?" inquired Arthur, eagerly.

"I think the scheme a good one, if it be not swamped; if the capital be not all jobbed away on such purchases, for instance, as this house of yours."

"Do you imply that I —," began the Squire; but Mr. Stewart cut across his sentence with —

"I imply nothing; all I would suggest is, that as at Mr. Black's instance you bought a very bad bargain, you should not seek to foist that bargain at a profit on your own Company, but wait patiently for dividends, and be thankful for any profit on your shares the Lord may in due time send you."

"Do you know, sir," asked Arthur, "that my money has advertised this Company?"

"Black said something of the kind," answered Mr.

Stewart; "and what he said, I am very sorry to hear confirmed by you."

"I have sold my crops, I have sold my stock, I have accepted bills, all on the faith of making my fortune out of this bread affair. Mr. Black declared I could get my money back three times over by buying from time to time such properties as he might advise — shops, mills, and so forth. He assured me he could and would guarantee the Company purchasing them from me on the most favourable terms. He mentioned to me the names of several individuals who have all made large fortunes in the same way."

"Yes, I know many men, as you say, who have obtained their money by jobbing," was the calm answer; "but they should not have got fat so soon had I been on the direction."

"It is rather hard upon me, though, to be made your scapegoat," said Arthur.

"Perhaps so," agreed Mr. Stewart; "but you know the innocent often suffer for the guilty. In fact, the scapegoat of which you have just spoken had not, so far as I am aware, committed any sin that should have doomed him to go unto a land not inhabited. He was selected impartially by lot, and then had to bear the iniquities of the children of Israel. You, Mr. Dudley, are chosen by accident to bear by proxy Mr. Black's sins of over-appropriation. He has already had quite as many pickings for himself as any company can bear, and we cannot now tolerate his beginning to pick for his friends."

"And your object in coming to tell me all this, Mr. Stewart?" demanded Arthur.

"Come, he is not quite an idiot," reflected that

gentleman, while he answered aloud — "My object is *bona fide;* I want to benefit you and myself also. I wish to explain exactly what I will and what I will not do. To begin with the last. I will not agree to the purchase of those premises in Lincoln's Inn, but I shall not oppose the Company renting them from year to year; and, if you like to resign your directorship, I will see that you are appointed secretary at a commencing salary of one thousand pounds per annum."

"What has the secretary to do?" asked Arthur.

"Very little, except remain honest," was the reply.

"And why do you wish me to be secretary?" he further demanded.

"Because I think we may depend upon you; because I know we could not depend on the secretary nominated by Mr. Black. In matters of this kind it does not do to stand too much upon ceremony. Am I wrong, Mr. Dudley, in supposing a thousand a year would prove an agreeable addition to your income?"

"I am not aware, sir," answered Arthur, in a moment all in a flame with anger, "that I have, in the course of our conversation, led you to believe I am short of money."

"There is a difference between being short of money and desiring more money," answered Mr. Stewart, calmly. "I concluded that, if you were a perfectly satisfied man, you would have rested content among your herds and flocks, and not sought to increase your store in the City. I thought I would come and talk this affair over with you before our next meeting; but if my doing so has assumed the character of an intrusion, I can only apologise and withdraw."

Having concluded which speech, Mr. Stewart rose

from his chair, and, bowing to Arthur, would have left the room, had his host not entreated him to remain.

"I am almost mad, I think," said the Squire, putting his hand to his forehead. "Excuse me if I seemed rude. I do not believe I knew what I was saying. It is a desperate experiment, Mr. Stewart, for a man who knows nothing whatever of business to allow himself to be drawn into it."

"Yes," answered the director, coolly; "and it is in the interests of such men that I decline permitting this Company to be made a job, for the advancement and enriching of the few at the expense of the many. In my opinion, you have acted foolishly in advancing large sums of money to Mr. Black; but it is to Mr. Black you should look for repayment, not to the shareholders."

Arthur made no reply. He sat with his head bent forward thinking to himself, "what a cursed idiot I have been!" This was the first check he had met with, and he bore it with proportionate impatience. When a man has grown used to disappointment and reverses; when he has met with a long series of losses and failures; when his temper has become, after a fashion, macadamized, and his spirit broken under the wheels of constantly passing hearses containing the bodies of his hopes, his certainties, his ambitious aspirings; then the sharp pang which was once so impossible to endure, is dulled to a kind of quiet aching. The pain wears itself out as the months and the years go by; and he who once chafed, grows apathetic; and she who formerly wept, now smiles and bears in silence.

But Arthur Dudley's pain was fresh, and it had, moreover, come sharply and suddenly upon him.

He had been stricken unprepared, and, though the wound inflicted might not be very severe, still it smarted as much as though his life had been placed in jeopardy.

All this Mr. Stewart observed and noted.

"That man has (for him) played high," he thought, "and staked not merely money but hope on the game;" then finding Arthur still resolutely kept silence, he proceeded:

"Mr. Black will altogether make a handsome thing out of this Company."

"Yes, and he promised to go halves with me!" interrupted Arthur, hoarsely.

"Indeed! and now he would fulfil that promise by showing you what to buy, and then recommending us to purchase from you; a very nice way of doing business for him, doubtless — very nice indeed."

"I wish to God I had never gone into the Company at all!" broke out the Squire, weakly and passionately; "and I did it on the strength of your name, and the names of men like you."

"That was foolish," said Mr. Stewart; "if you had asked me for advice, I should decidedly have recommended you to leave the Protector Flour and Bread Company, Limited, alone."

"But you expect to make money out of it," said Arthur, obstinately.

"Yes, but I am also prepared to lose money," was the reply; "which fact constitutes the difference between us. If a man be, as I have always been, a speculator, he takes the rough with the smooth, the

failure with the success. I lay out my plans as well as I can, but I, at the same time, take my chance. Moreover, Mr. Dudley, I can afford to wait for success; you, perhaps, are not quite so fortunately situated."

"Did you come here to insult me?" asked the Squire.

"No; on the contrary, I came here to help you, if you will permit me to do so. We are not playing quite a fair game," added the director, with sudden frankness. "You are showing me your hand — I have scarcely given you a sight of mine. Suppose, I say unreservedly, I also have embarked more money in this venture than I should care to lose, we should then stand on more equal terms. You have advanced money to float the Company; I am a shareholder — a *bona-fide* shareholder, remember — to a large amount; I do not want our ship to go to the bottom, neither do you; Mr. Black, a very worthy individual, no doubt, has a knack of floating companies, and then sinking them. Now, it is not your interest, any more than it is mine, that this Company should fail; we want to see the shares at a premium, and to secure regularly-paid and satisfactory dividends. There is nothing to prevent such a desirable consummation, if the affairs of the Company be only properly managed. Now, if any nominee of your friend, Mr. Black, be appointed permanent secretary, there is no telling what the end of the matter may prove. Therefore, I offer you this secretaryship; say the word, and you shall have it. We will rent the Lincoln's Inn premises from you; there is a good house there in which you might reside, and you would then be on the spot to look after

your own interests, and those of your fellow-shareholders."

Arthur wavered: the temptation was great, the salary sounded large, but he did not feel inclined so readily to turn his back on an old friend.

"If you had such an opinion of Mr. Black," he said, "why did you ever go into this Company with him?"

"As for that," answered Mr. Stewart, with a smile, "there is scarcely an undertaking of the kind which has not one black sheep at least in its ranks. Now, I am quite aware of the nature of Mr. Black's weakness, and, you may recollect, it is stated to be better to have to do with a devil you know, than a devil you do not know. Further, Mr. Black is undeniably clever, and he has, equally undeniably, got hold of a good thing."

"And yet you say, had I consulted you in the first instance, you would have advised me to keep clear of it!"

"On the terms — yes," was Mr. Stewart's reply. "Had Mr. Black come to you and said, 'Here are a couple of hundred shares, paid up, which will qualify you to act as a director, let me have your name on our board in exchange,' I should have recommended you to accept his offer; because, if the Company succeeded, there were the shares; if it failed, you had no liability; either way, you would have been safe. But when it comes to advancing money — even on the best security that Mr. Black could offer — the case is materially altered. I should not have counselled such a risk as that, Mr. Dudley, depend upon it!"

"Do you think Mr. Black will not repay me, then?" asked Arthur.

"I do not think Mr. Black can repay you," amended Mr. Stewart; "with the best will in the world, I am confident that he has not the means of doing so at present. His other companies will swallow up every available sixpence he can scrape together for the next twelvemonth."

"But I have my shares," said the Squire.

"True; but paid-up shares are never of any real marketable value, unless all the shares are paid up."

"Why?" was the next inquiry.

"Because," explained Mr. Stewart, "no man will pay ten pounds for that which he can buy immediately for two: as, for instance, if you went on the market to-morrow, you would not be so foolish as to purchase a paid-up share, in any company, for twenty pounds, if you could procure exactly the same advantages for five. You could but pay your calls, if they were demanded; you would not rush to your bankers and write a cheque for the full sum at once. In some prospectuses — in one of Mr. Black's, by-the-bye — there is a very delicious paragraph, to the effect, that 'although no further calls will be made at shorter intervals than three months, and then in amounts not exceeding one pound per share, still the shareholders may, at any time after allotment, pay up their shares in full, receiving interest on such payments at the rate of six per cent. per annum!' I never met with a man desirous of paying up his shares in full, however," finished Mr. Stewart with a quiet laugh.

"Do you mean, then, to tell me that until all the shares are paid up, those I have will remain valueless?" demanded Arthur.

"Comparatively so," was the reply.

"Then what good — if I cannot sell my shares, nor dispose of my property, and if there be no chance of Mr. Black dividing his profits with me — is this Company likely to do to me or mine?"

"You will have your dividends, if we are lucky enough ever to get any," answered Mr. Stewart; "and, should you entertain my proposal, I promise you the secretaryship also; that will yield you a thousand a year. Perhaps you will consider the matter, Mr. Dudley, and let me know your decision before Saturday next. You have my address. I shall be returning to town to-morrow."

And the great man rose to go, having, as he felt confident, settled the business which had brought him down into Hertfordshire.

Arthur accompanied him to the outer door.

"What a lovely place you have!" said the director, looking round, approvingly. "A spot I should covet, if it were twenty miles nearer London."

"It is very inaccessible," Arthur agreed. This light kind of conversation appeared to him very much like the political small talk to which a surgeon will sometimes treat a patient next day after an operation.

"It would not be exactly convenient for a man who wished to be in town every day at eight o'clock," suggested Mr. Stewart; "but it is very charming, nevertheless. Good-morning!" And this man, who was between seventy and eighty years of age, started off to

walk back to Kemms Park, as briskly as Arthur himself might have done.

"Old enough to have given up grubbing after money," muttered Arthur, criticizing his visitor's retreating figure; as though a man ever fancied himself old enough to relinquish the occupation of his life, so long as he could hold a pen or dictate a letter, bring a bill into Parliament, or buy to advantage on the Stock Exchange.

Old enough! Is it not only the young, now-a-days, who feel old and cry aloud for rest; who grow weary and tired of the heat and burden of the noontide? When the back has become used to the pack, and the world's collar has ceased to gall; the horse, let it be ever so old, will amble along the familiar road, without whip or spur to urge him on. It is the colts who turn aside, who long for the idle days and the green pastures, for the meadows where the holiday-folks are making merry, and the silvery streams flowing through the midst.

CHAPTER III.

A few Bills.

HITHERTO, Squire Dudley had, since his connection with Mr. Black, experienced no shortness of money. The man who spends two years' income in one, does not, as a rule, find the pecuniary shoe begin to pinch until he enters on the second twelve-month, and realises to himself the truth that it is impossible both to spend and to have.

There is a time of plenty during which the prodigal wastes his substance and takes life easily, and then after that comes the season of famine, when he is fain to content himself with very roots and husks — when, having once entertained like a prince, he is compelled to expiate his folly in retirement, and refresh his spirit with herbs of the field, and water from the brook.

In Joseph's dream, the seven fat kine preceded the seven lean; the same rule was observed also in Squire Dudley's less prudent experience, though it produced by no means a like result. Never, for many and many a long year, had Arthur been so flush of cash, and so careless about expending it, as in the days before Mr. Stewart's friendly visit.

Lightly come, lightly gone, that was the way with his money then! It is difficult for a man, such as Arthur Dudley, exactly to realise the fact that lending his name may eventually prove the hardest day's work he ever did in his life; in truth, it is a fact difficult

for any one unacquainted with business, to understand theoretically. It is but a few strokes of the pen, and the thing is done. Your obliging friend, who has been kind enough to draw out the document for you, and perhaps even buy the stamp, gets the paper discounted. He takes out of it what you promised to let him have, and duly hands over the remainder.

The money is then a certainty — the bill, an illusion, is gone; your friend will meet it, never fear. He tells you not to trouble your head about the matter. Like Mr. Black, he will "take a memorandum of it," and that memorandum seems to you a perfect security for the genuineness of the transaction.

Time, however, goes by; the money is spent, the bill is coming due; then it is the first item which appears the illusion; the latter, the certainty. Concerning wasted sovereigns and mis-spent five-pound notes, a useless jeremiade is sung.

If you had but the past to live over again, you think, how differently you would act; meantime, however, you cannot live the past over again, and the bill is coming due.

When it does come due, there is only one thing of which you may be morally certain, namely, that you will have to take it up; that, spite of your friend's memorandum and assurances, he will be at the last moment disappointed, and so disappoint you.

You have had your cake, or at least a portion of that dainty; you have eaten and digested it; and now comes the time for payment; now come the anxious days and sleepless nights; now begins the begging, borrowing, realising; you have within five pounds of the amount required — you might as well not have a

penny; you must scrape those other hundred shillings together before five o'clock on the evening of the day of presentation, or else your precious document falls into the notary's hands. In his hands there is still another short chance for your credit; but fail to avail yourself of that, and what ensues?

Mr. Black was the man to have given every possible information on this subject. I do not think any other human being ever had so many bills returned to him as he; it is doubtful if any one in the length and breadth of London had devoted so much time to raising the wind; whether there ever existed any one who, so almost invariably, never took up his bills at all, or drove up with what he called the needful to the door of his bank, at the very stroke almost of four, or rushed away to the other bank where the bill was lying, or else to the notary's in Finch Lane.

What a reality dishonoured bills may prove, Mr. Peter Black had, many a time and oft, personally tested, in the pleasant retirement of the Cripplegate Hotel.

In the lofty public room of that desirable house of public entertainment, he had frequently made vows against paper, and mentally signed the pledge of total abstinence against all accommodation bills, but vows registered among a number of fellow-victims, amid a Babel of strange tongues, or in the shady courts and cool corridors that used to be so much approved and patronized by former dwellers in Whitecross Street; with visions of angry creditors, and an unsympathetic commissioner in perspective, are apt to be forgotten when the man is free again — free to push his way forward — to trade, and struggle, and strive, and get into trouble again, if he list.

A bill was nothing to Mr. Black. He had done in bills all his life. Trading, as was his fashion, always in advance of his fortune, it will readily be believed that "paper" was to him the very soul of business — that soul, in fact, which animated what would otherwise have been a very dead, stupid, helpless sort of body.

Mr. Black's diary of bills to meet was a literary curiosity well worth inspecting, if it were borne at the same time in mind that the promoter had not sixpenny-worth of real tangible property in the world.

But he had that which often stands a man in much better stead than property: he had faith; and it is not in religious matters only that faith is able to remove mountains.

He believed utterly in himself and in his own financial abilities; by means of this belief, he was enabled not merely to remove mountains, but also to create them out of molehills; wonderful companies — endless Limited Liabilities — great works were developed from the merest, paltriest, smallest businesses that any one could mention.

And because of his faith he was, conversationally, rather a pleasant man with whom to be connected in business. Let who else would, sing a poor song, he "never said die;" let who might be cross and changeable, faint-hearted and desponding, Mr. Black was always the same.

Always self-reliant, cheery, hopeful, certain of success, that sort of man who never meets an acquaintance with a long face; who is not affected by the weather, who shakes hands just as heartily if the rain be pouring down Heavens hard, as he would if it

were the finest day in summer; who considers snow a joke, and frost an agreeable change; who is never down on his luck; whose barometer, according to his own showing, is always rising; with whom it is, at least, fair weather from January till December; who, if he do chance to get a heavy blow, is only staggered by it for the moment; who is not eternally complaining about his own health, or his wife's health, or the sickness of his ten children, or the bad state of trade, or the difficulties of fighting through, but who always says, with a cheery nod —

"Quite well, thank you. Business? oh, capital; never had such a month — more work to do than I can get through. Wish I could cut myself up to be in a dozen places at once. All well with you? that's right; good-day, good-day!"

To a man like this, it may readily be imagined, Arthur Dudley proved a perfect mine of wealth — a true God-send, as he reverently remarked to Mr. Bailey Crossenham.

When first he and Arthur started together in the new Company, Mr. Black informed the Brothers Crossenham that "he drew it mild with the Squire;" but soon, finding that gentleman believed every word he told him, the promoter grew less delicate, and would persuade his kinsman to accept three or four bills for him in the course of a week.

It was such a rare experience for Mr. Black to hold thoroughly good paper — paper concerning which no objection could be made, that he felt it would be quite a slighting of Providence not to enjoy that strange sensation thoroughly.

To allow a name like Dudley's to waste its sweet-

ness among the Hertfordshire fields, and never figure on stamped slips of foolscap in banks and discount offices, would have seemed to Mr. Black the merest quixotism.

Here was what he had always sighed for — a good name. Like the individual who would have given ten thousand pounds for a good character, because, on the strength of that character, he could have trebled that sum immediately, Mr. Black conceived that one good name must inevitably lead to more. Should he suffer this gift to lie unused — should he allow this talent to remain buried in a napkin? Never; a thousand times, never. And, accordingly, he employed Arthur's name as freely as he might his own, which is saying a good deal; and Arthur rested satisfied.

Would not money turn in after Christmas. Were he and Mr. Black not to go shares? Would those thousands not be returning to him from the sale of the Lincoln's Inn property? Was the Company not well thought of — well talked about? Had not Walter Hope — spite of his aunt's remonstrances — added his name to the Direction, without a moment's hesitation? Had he not said to Mrs. Walter Hope, —

"And the dividends shall be yours, my love?" an arrangement which met with that lady's entire approval. Had Mr. Douglas Croft not remarked that Black was "a sly fox, but a devilish clever fellow — a fellow who could float anything, if he only took it into his head to do so?" Had he not tasted of the sweets of spending money freely — of spending without pausing first to consider, "Can I afford this expense?"

His deeds now went in front, and his prudent thoughts lagged slowly behind. After the long Lent of

fasting and humiliation — of poverty and strict abstinence from all extravagance — from all worldly pleasures — all social amusements — there suddenly dawned an Easter morning on his life, full of brightness and pleasure — a morning when the old traditions were forgotten, and a new era was begun.

Mr. Stewart's visit was the first occurrence which cast an actual shadow over all this radiancy. Previously, light clouds might have swept across the sky — a few misgivings through his heart — so far, he had neither seen nor heard anything of the money, some portion of which he knew, for certain, Mr. Black must have received. Neither had letters from that gentleman arrived with quite their accustomed punctuality at Berrie Down. "Christmas-time," the promoter stated, threw everything, for a short period, out of gear, and then ensued silence, until on the morning of Mr. Stewart's visit came a communication ending with these ominous words, —

"I am right for the bill due on Saturday, but should like to see you about the others."

About the others! Good Heavens, what concern were they of Squire Dudley's? Mr. Black, or the bank, or the Company, or somebody, was to take them up; certainly not Arthur.

The herds and flocks, the crops and Nellie, had represented to Squire Dudley tangible property advanced into the "Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited," but his name seemed the very vaguest valuable possible, and he had stared at first, when Mr. Black suggested using it.

Now, however, the very vagueness of the threatened peril filled his mind with alarm. What could Mr. Black

want with him? and what did he mean by being "right for that on Saturday?" Was he not right for all? and if he were not, how did he expect the sight of Squire Dudley to put him so?

There was a terrible uncertainty about the matter which seemed very frightful to Arthur; and then, on the top of this letter — following it almost as swiftly as the thunderclap does lightning — came Mr. Stewart, and the interview already detailed.

Altogether, the second day in the new year was not one marked with a white stone in Squire Dudley's memory, yet it brought, in due time, its consolation, for pondering over the matter, Arthur discovered two tangible pieces of comfort on which to hang his hopes: one, the offer of the secretaryship; the other, Mr. Stewart's own evident belief in the ultimate success of the Company.

"So I will run up to town to-morrow and see Black," decided Squire Dudley — who had vainly striven to catch a glimpse of that gentleman on Boxing Day, when he went to inform Mr. Ormson of his daughter's misdemeanor — "and I will tell him frankly about the secretaryship, so that there may be no underhand dealing in the matter, and I can see how the place in Lincoln's Inn would suit for a residence, and then give Mr. Stewart a decided answer."

Already his opera-box and horses and carriages, his grand town residence, his hunters, his hacks, his fashionable friends, were dwindling down to a thousand a year and a free house — to work which, slight though it might be, was more than he had ever thought of previously attempting. Already the dream-castle was beginning to fade away, and the sober stone-and-mortar

building of reality taking its place; but Arthur Dudley resolutely refused to see the inevitable change which had commenced being wrought.

Bitten by the mania prevalent amongst those men with whom he had latterly freely associated, the Squire would not regard the secretaryship as any thing except a useful step onward — a mere trifle which would keep him in funds till the Company began to pay dividends, and shares rose to some enormous premium.

When a person is making an imaginative fortune, there can be no possible reason why he should not do the thing thoroughly.

Mentally, it is as easy to nett fifty thousand pounds as one — to send shares up to fabulous prices as to keep them at par; "in fact, if a man once lets his fancy get the reins, he may mount to whatever height pleases him and his charioteer best.

The only drawback to which proceeding is, that if he get a fall, he stands a chance of being badly injured by it. Even Fancy seldom travels with a free ticket — there are expenses incident on a too great intimacy with that fair lady. She is apt to lead people a good deal astray sometimes, with her glancing smiles and her bright bewitching eyes — with her sweet tones, which fall so pleasantly on the ear — with her seductive words, which ring such pleasant changes on the usually prosaic bells of life.

But Arthur Dudley was not a man to turn back into the cold realms of reality when once he had basked in the sunshine of prospective success. Children think that they can keep back the rain-cloud by turning their eyes away from that corner of the heavens whence the wind is blowing; and, in like manner, Squire Dudley

persisted in looking at the spot of blue which revealed itself in his sky, and resolutely ignoring all the blackness which was sweeping up behind.

"The 'Protector' should pay" — even Mr. Stewart had said something to that effect; and the very first thing which met Arthur's delighted gaze, as he walked down Gray's Inn Lane from the King's Cross Station, was a huge vehicle — apparently constructed on the joint models of a police-van and a cattle-truck, driven by a man in a quiet livery of orange and green, and guarded by a hanging footman, decked out in the like complimentary colours — which vehicle bore on its sides this inscription: —

"VIS UNITA FORTIOR,"

the motto of the Company, its device being a bundle of sticks firmly tied together.

Then followed —

"PROTECTOR"

FLOUR AND BREAD COMPANY (LIMITED).

INCORPORATED UNDER ACT OF PARLIAMENT,

For the purpose of Supplying the Public with the Best Bread at the Lowest Possible Price.

If this did not look like business, Arthur wondered what would. If all that varnish and gilding, all that lettering and painting, did not indicate success, he was very much out in his calculations. It was only the

third day for the vans to be out, and they had not yet lost their pristine brilliancy. They were clean and fresh, as though they had that moment come out of the builder's hands — the liveries were free from spot or stain — the brass of the harness was bright as lacquer — the horses were groomed to perfection — the drivers and the men behind both looked, in their fine conspicuous clothing, conscious and conceited, and, perhaps, a little shamefaced besides.

The London boys cheered the splendid conveyance, and put, at the same time, various rude questions to the individuals in charge.

The idle, dirty, half-starved looking women who are always gathered round the entrance to those wretched courts leading out of Gray's Inn Lane, stared after the vehicle, and made audible comments upon it, which Arthur could hear as he passed by.

Very well-dressed people also took notice of the van, and wondered what the meaning of the motto might be. Ladies were especially interested in this question; and Arthur longed to stop and tell a few of the sweet creatures — not merely the English of *Vis Unita Fortior*, but also that he was one of the directors in the great Company.

Walking down Gray's Inn Lane, the Squire certainly was a proof of the truth of his own quotation. As a master baker, singly, he would have felt very much ashamed of his trade, and vexed by any public recognition of it. As a master baker, associated with other gentlemen and noblemen also bakers, Squire Dudley conceived himself a person of importance, one of a body of philanthropists, who, "hearing the cry of the people for bread, pure bread, sweet, wholesome,

nutritious bread, at a moderate price, had determined on forming themselves into a Company which, under the name of the 'Protector," should guard alike the rights of producer and consumer — supply the public with the best bread at the lowest remunerative prices — ensure to the shareholders a fair and certain return for capital — do away with unwholesome, ill-ventilated, badly-constructed, insufficient and uncleanly bakehouses, and render the trade wholesome and remunerative to the employés connected with it, instead of permitting it to remain, as hitherto, a blot on nineteenth century civilization — one of the most enervating, pestiferous, dangerous trades which could be conceived." — *Vide* Prospectus.

This is one of the many beauties of a Limited Liability Company: a man can have all the excitement, profit, and pleasure of trade, without any of its unpleasantness.

If he be one of the directors on the board of, say "The Private Dwelling Chimney-Sweeping Association," he still remains a gentleman.

In the Bankruptcy Court, indeed, where some singular anomalies are still permitted to exist, he might be styled a dealer and chapman; but in West End drawing-rooms his standing is above suspicion. He is a wise individual who, despising trade, is still not above making use of it; who, knowing nothing of business, would nevertheless go and reap of the corn which his hand neither planted nor watered; he can do, as Squire Dudley wished to do, "gather where he has not strawed," and march in and out of City offices as though the whole of the Lord Mayor's kingdom from

Ludgate to the Tower, and from Moorgate to London Brige, belonged to him.

It was with this feeling Arthur Dudley, spite of his anxieties, entered the temporary offices in Dowgate Hill, where he was greeted by Mr. Black with an uproarious joviality.

"Well, old fellow, and how are you? Bills brought you up express, I see; thought nothing short of them could get me a speedy sight of you. I did not want you about them at all, you know, really, for I could have sent you the renewals to sign by post as easily as not. Yes, we must renew. I have such a devil of a lot of things on hand at the present time — good things, but still all crying out for money. Well, and how are you? and your charming lady, and my friend Lally, you know? Poor little cricket! I was deucedly sorry to hear of her being so ill; and oh! isn't that a business about Ormson's daughter! By Jove! the old man is cut up, and no mistake. Mrs. O. takes it better than he — comes the Roman matron and that sort of thing; think I liked her quite as well before I heard her declaiming against the girl. Mrs. Black believes her sister forced Bessie to accept Harcourt against her will, and led her a nice life at home over it. I always considered Mrs. O. a very superior sort of woman; but I suppose God who made it is the only one who rightly understands female nature. It is an enigma to me. Who's she off with, Squire? Come, it is all in the family, and you need not keep the matter dark here."

"I have not the remotest idea," answered Arthur. "No one seems able to give the slightest clue. She must have been a sly, deep girl to make a flight like that. She bribed one of the servants, went down the

back staircase, out across the farmyard, away along the field avenue, and so into Berrie Down Lane, where her lover, it appears, was waiting for her."

"She was a very pretty girl, Dudley," said Mr. Black, meditatively, speaking of her beauty already in the past tense.

"I never saw anything so particularly wonderful about her," answered Arthur, coolly.

"Well, she might not be your style, you know; but still she was undeniably pretty. Talking about style, by-the-bye, I saw your old flame, Mrs. Croft, yesterday. I suppose you are not touchy about a fellow speaking his mind concerning her? You had a miss there — such as a man might have of losing his life. I'd as lief be married to the devil. Croft asked me up to dinner, and I don't think that madame liked it; at any rate, she made herself so confoundedly disagreeable that Croft seemed downright ashamed of her. And didn't she nag him! that is enough. He broke a vase on the drawing-room chimney-piece after dinner, and I never heard a poor beast so pitched into in all my life. And before the servants, too! If she had said the one-half to me she said to him, I should not have minded doing six months for what I would have given her. A man was telling me a good thing about Croft the other day. It appears he had been complaining to some of his wife's male relations about the way she goes on, and this fellow, some fool of a swell, did not seem able to make out what exact fault Croft laid to her charge. 'Isn't she pwoper?' he drawled out. 'Proper!' says Croft, in that sharp off-hand way of his, 'damnably proper.' Ah, we may laugh at it," went on Mr. Black, doubtless speaking figuratively, for

he was not laughing, and not a ghost of a smile could have been detected on Arthur's face; "but it must be the very deuce to be tied to a woman like that. While she was going on at him, blowing him up sky-high, and sweeping about in her grand dress, with a crinoline big enough to have camped out under, I thought of your wife, Squire, and I said to a man this very morning, not half-an-hour ago, —

"Well, Dudley must be a deuced lucky fellow — not merely to have missed that woman, but to have got the wife he has. There is no sham there — no angel one day, and devil the next."

Arthur cleared his throat. He felt as though he were choking; he wanted to make some withering speech in answer to this officious fool, but he was not quick of wit nor ready with repartee.

First, to lose a woman, to be jilted, to have an heiress slip out of his fingers, to be supplanted by a wealthier suitor, to be flung back from the height of prospective affluence to the dead level of certain poverty, and then to be congratulated on the subject, and called a lucky fellow! To hear another man who had gained the prize pitied for his success, and he, Arthur, felicitated on having chosen a wife who did not suit him in the least. Arthur knew Heather did not suit him — that she was not the woman he ought to have married. At that moment he felt very ungrateful both towards Heaven and the help-meet Heaven had sent him, and he felt further that he hated Mr. Black with a perfect hatred, for which reason, as he could not think of any specially clever or cutting remark that might advantageously be uttered, he turned the conversation into a

channel which he thought must prove disagreeable to Mr. Black, and said, —

"Speaking of Croft, Stewart called on me yesterday."

"Ah, yes," answered the promoter, briskly; "been down staying with his cousin, the Honourable Augusta, I hear. That would be a nice suitable match, now; thought it likely he might call. He told you he meant to oppose the purchase of your Lincoln's Inn speculation, I suppose?"

"Your Lincoln's Inn speculation, rather," retorted Arthur, a little indignantly.

"*Our* Lincoln's Inn speculation, then, to meet the views of both parties," proposed Mr. Black. "So he called to tell you about that, did he? People's ideas of civility differ. I would just as soon call on a man to pick his pocket as to inform him I meant to overthrow his plans."

"That was not Mr. Stewart's sole object in calling," remarked Arthur.

"Oh! indeed; and what might his object be, if I am not too inquisitive?"

"Not at all; I came up partly on purpose to tell you. Guess the nature of the proposal he made."

"That you should wind up the Company, or try to do so; that he and you and Mr. Raidsford and Lord Kemms should start an opposition bakery of your own; that you should purchase Mr. Scrotter's flour-mill, and sell it to the Company; that you and Mr. Stewart should agree to support each other through everything. There, I have guessed often enough. What is this wonderful proposal which he made to you yesterday?"

"Guess again. I would rather that you jumped at it yourself."

"Hang it! I can't guess what the old humbug wanted with you. Did he propose marrying one of your sisters? — or —— I have it!" exclaimed Mr. Black; "he offered you the secretaryship?"

"He did."

"And you accepted it?"

"No, I did not: I felt a delicacy ——"

"Felt nonsense!" interrupted Mr. Black; "how could you be such a simpleton? You must be rich to throw away a thousand a year for delicacy! Deuce a thing to do except sit before the fire for a certain number of hours reading the *Times* — have clerks under you to do everything — read the *Times* for you, if you like! And a secretaryship to which you are appointed through the interest of Allan Stewart! By Jove! it is as good as an annuity. You felt a delicacy about interfering with Mr. Crossenham — that's the hitch, is it? Very nice, and proper, and gentlemanly indeed — very; but Crossenham, you see, is not going to retain the secretaryship — no, not if we went down on our knees and prayed him to keep it, which I, for one, have no intention of doing."

"Why will he not keep it?" asked Arthur, in amazement.

"Because it don't suit him," was the reply. "He has always been used to work, and he don't like idling. He says he has no fancy for loafing about, with his hands in his pockets, drawing only a poor two hundred and fifty a quarter, when there are thousands of pounds to be picked up by any one willing to look out for chances. Of course, he is quite another style of fellow

from what you are, Dudley. He has been in business all his life; and what really is a very good appointment for you, seems almost like shelving him. I thought, as his health was not very good, he might be glad of such a berth. But no; he is hungering and thirsting after work — work, and no gammon — that is what he calls it. Besides, he hates talking to those swells who are quite in your way, you know. If Crossenham be your only objection, here is pen, ink, and paper — write at once to Mr. Stewart, and say you accept his offer."

"But if I do that, I bind myself not to ask the Company to purchase my Lincoln's Inn property."

"And much good it would do if you did ask the Company to purchase it, with Allan Stewart against you! Look here, Dudley. Stewart is going to be the god of our board; so your best plan, if you want things to go pretty square, is, thankfully to receive all he likes to offer you. My power is gone, you know. Whenever he came crowing it over me, with his shares, and his influence, and his wealth, and his connection, I gave in at once; so take a friend's advice, and accept. Did he promise to rent the house from you? That is right. He proposed you should live there! The very best thing possible. Good airy rooms, central situation, near the theatres, accessible to everywhere!"

"And about those bills, Mr. Black?"

"Yes, about those bills! We must renew for a few months, till my ventures begin to make me some return. A mere matter of form! I will pay the interest, of course, and you shall have back the old bills. Here, Collins," cried Mr. Black, opening the door be-

tween the two offices, "run over the way and get me a pound's worth of bill-stamps. Three shilling and two shilling — four of each. Look sharp now, and don't be the whole day about it. While we are 'melting,' you might as well have a few hundreds, might you not, Dudley? You will want some money to carry you over till quarter-day, and there will be the expenses connected with moving, and so forth. How much? — say three! You know we can always get more, if you run short."

"But supposing that you are unable to meet those bills?" ventured Arthur.

"Why, then, we must renew again," answered Mr. Black, cheerily, "and renew, and renew, and renew till one or other of us comes into his fortune. We cannot be kept out of it for ever," added Mr. Black, jocularly. There was no having this man; once afloat with him, no one need ever after expect to touch solid land — once launched in the same boat, and you had to obey Captain Black, who would have laughed while sending one of the crew to his death, and kept "up the steam" had his nearest friend been dying.

Spite of his good spirits, however, Arthur ventured to interrogate him concerning the marketable value of paid-up shares, as to which the promoter's opinion was almost identical with that of Mr. Stewart.

"But they are available as security," proceeded Mr. Black. "For instance, if you were pushed for money, you could get an advance upon them. They are much the same as Berrie Down, you understand, tangible property — something to show, if a creditor turns crusty, or discount rises too high. We shall, all of us, do very well yet; and I am glad you are coming

to town. You will never care to go back to Hertfordshire afterwards, even when you are worth ten thousand a year. Here are the stamps; that is right. Now, Dudley, I must trouble you for a moment. Let us first see the amounts, however, of those we must renew;" and Mr. Black, pulling out his pocket-book, consulted various memoranda which it contained, all having reference to certain of the bills coming due as fast as the autumn peaches ripen.

"I may as well give you a cheque for three hundred," said Mr. Black; "no need to be sending it down after you;" and Peter Black forthwith drew a cheque for three hundred pounds in favour of Arthur Dudley, Esquire, or order, which document he crossed, "Hertford and South Kemms' Banking Company."

Mr. Stewart would have known that he did this in order to give himself time to get some of Arthur's acceptances discounted before the cheque came back to his bankers; but Squire Dudley, being less acquainted with business manœuvres than the great director, thought it was all in the ordinary course of affairs.

It did not occur to him either as singular that many of the bills he accepted should bear no drawer's signature attached — an omission Mr. Stewart would at once have detected and challenged.

Truth was, Mr. Black and the two Crossenhams played into each other's hands, thus: the Crossenhams would get a bill discounted at their bankers, the produce of which Black would then pay into his own bank. Then he would get a bill discounted, with Crossenhams' name to it as drawer, and hand that amount over to Crossenhams. Thus, the bills went dancing about like shuttlecocks — they were paid

away, they were discounted, they were given as security, and nobody but Mr. Black knew for what exact sum Arthur had made himself liable.

"Enough to puzzle Berrie Down," said Mr. Black to himself, thoughtfully, as, after Arthur's departure, he totted up the amounts attached to the memoranda of which mention has previously been made; "enough to puzzle Berrie Down, if the 'Protector' come to grief; but it shall not do that, not, at any rate, until I have had my penn'orths out of it."

Having arrived at which prudent and honest conclusion, Mr. Black closed his pocket-book, circling it for extra security with an india-rubber band. That pocket-book, which never left Mr. Black's person except when he was asleep (and then he locked it up in a small safe in his dressing-room), contained all the present secrets of the promoter's life.

Had Mr. Stewart only obtained a sight of the pages that band kept so tightly together, he might reasonably have considered the ultimate success of the "Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited," problematical.

CHAPTER IV.

How Heather took it.

The secretaryship was duly accepted, although not by letter; Arthur Dudley thought it best to call upon Mr. Stewart, and express in person his willingness to fill up the post offered.

Probably a secret pride influenced this determination. After a fashion, he was going to be the man's servant; but that was no reason why he should not return Mr. Stewart's call, and place himself on a footing of social equality with him.

For this reason, also, he did not walk from Dowgate Hill to King's Arm Yard, and take his chance of seeing Mr. Stewart at his office, as anybody else, standing less upon his dignity, might have done; but, at considerable inconvenience, repaired next afternoon to the great director's house, where, of course, he did not find him.

This, however, was a matter of secondary importance. The Squire had done the proper thing in the proper manner, and, having left his card, went back to Mr. Black's abode satisfied.

The same evening a messenger arrived in Stanley Crescent with a note from Mr. Stewart, expressive of regret at having missed seeing Mr. Dudley, and begging him to breakfast with the writer the following morning at ten o'clock.

"A business fellow," observed Mr. Black, approvingly, "and worth such a lot of money; I wonder who

will have it when he dies. Croft, likely as not. Is there not some scripture about people who have much, getting more?"

Very heartily Arthur Dudley secretly anathematised this Croft, who seemed to be now, as he thought, for ever under his nose.

Already he was beginning to have personal experience of the truth Mr. Raidsford had mentioned to Lord Kemms — namely, that people always meet again; that, let the circle in which they revolve be large or small, still they ultimately come back to the point whence they started, and are brought once more into contact with the men and the women they knew at that period in their career.

If he please, a man may, like Arthur Dudley, curse the old ties, and strive to break away from them; but, like Arthur Dudley also, he will find after the years that there is no severance possible.

Friends and acquaintances; those whom we once knew well; those whom we have merely met, crop up continually in our path. We come across them in unlikely places; we encounter them in strange houses; we are thrown against them under the most singular circumstances. We leave them, as we think, behind, and behold, we discover, when the years roll by, that they have been travelling also; that, during all the time which seemed to be increasing the distance between us, we have really been traversing gradually converging lines, which bring us, after the springs, and the summers, and the autumns, and the winters, face to face at last.

Here, after years, for instance, was Squire Dudley brought into contact once again with the people he

had known and dwelt among in his earlier manhood; here, also, he was going to breakfast with the bachelor of Scotch proclivities, who had so long ago influenced the name bestowed upon Heather at her baptism. Once more there was a likelihood of Mrs. Dudley reviving the associations of her childhood, and meeting with some of the members of her own kith and kin.

The Bells of Layford — amongst whom figured prominently a Sir Wingrave Bell — had long been friends of Mr. Allan Stewart.

Scottish people all, come southward, they hang together after the goodly manner of their country; and, very probably, had it not been for the unhappy quarrel which ended in utter alienation between the Rector of Layford, and his cousin and patron's eldest friend and ally, Mr. Stewart would have done well for his godchild when she was left an orphan, and not relinquished her without a struggle into the hands of Mrs. Travers, who had proved herself, perhaps, a little unduly anxious to be rid of such a trust.

As it was, when Mr. Bell died, Mr. Stewart chanced to be abroad. On his return he casually inquired what had become of the daughter, and being informed that her aunt had taken the orphan to her own home, let the matter drop out of his recollection. Of Heather's connection with Arthur Dudley he was completely ignorant, and Arthur was not the man to acquaint him with it.

But yet, while the Squire sat opposite to his host at breakfast, he was wondering whether in due course of time, if the fact did by any chance come to Mr. Stewart's knowledge, it might not prove beneficial to himself; induce the director to withdraw his opposition

concerning the purchase of that "desirable house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, with yard at the back, over which a large room could be built (see advertisement), and the right of walking in the gardens of the Square."

Why this last clause always presented itself to Arthur Dudley's mind, it would be somewhat difficult to say, since a board of directors is not usually alive to the advantages of a "key to the Square;" but still, that it did present itself is unquestionable, and he thought about it while Mr. Stewart said he was glad to hear his visitor had decided not to press the matter on the Company, but to accept the secretaryship, and take up his residence in Lincoln's Inn.

"A very good situation for a dwelling," finished Mr. Stewart, who would as soon have thought of living in Lincoln's Inn as he would have thought of flying; "and a good house too. You are married, I presume?"

Arthur admitted the correctness of Mr. Stewart's supposition.

"That is right; every man ought to marry," said the bachelor. "Have you any children?"

"Two — a boy and girl," said the Squire; "one of them is in very bad health. I do not know what her mother will think about bringing her to town."

"You have not mentioned your intentions, then, to Mrs. Dudley?" said Mr. Stewart, apparently surprised.

"I thought it would be time enough to tell her when the matter was settled," answered Arthur.

"Evidently, then, you will not consider it necessary to take your wife into your confidence concerning all the affairs of our Company?" suggested the director.

"I do not think women ever understand anything

of business matters," Arthur replied; then, noticing Mr. Stewart smile, he added, "and I am positive my wife would not wish me to tell her any of the affairs of my principals."

"I have heard of Mrs. Dudley as a lady of an excellent discretion," said Mr. Stewart.

"You do not expect me to praise my own wife," answered Arthur, deprecating this praise; and the evasion was really rather a clever one for him. If he had praised her at all, however, it would simply have been as his wife, and because she belonged to him, not in her mere capacity as a woman.

Mr. Stewart felt curious about this Mrs. Dudley, whose husband so decidedly refused to speak of her. Miss Baldwin had been by no means so reticent. She had described Heather to her cousin, and told him all about the brothers and sisters who used to run wild before the young wife's arrival at Berrie Down. Lally also was not left out of the narrative. "The sweetest little creature in the world," the Honourable Augusta declared; "just the child you would love, Mr. Stewart."

"I never saw the child I loved yet," said the old bachelor, somewhat incredulously, "and I do not think I ever shall."

Notwithstanding this speech, however, Mr. Stewart had been secretly touched by Miss Baldwin's description of mother and child, which description caused him to form a mental picture of Mrs. Dudley that did not exactly frame in the setting Arthur now provided for her.

"Is this fellow such a weak fool as to be envious of his wife," thought the director; "or is there really

some flaw in his pearl of which the little world of South Kemms is not cognisant?" Mr. Stewart could not understand his companion's domestic relations, so he thought he would try him on another tack — his children.

"I heard something, when I was at Kemms Park, about your little girl having met with an accident," he began.

"Yes, she fell into that mill-pond at the bottom of my farm, and was nearly drowned," Arthur replied, shortly.

"She has been very ill since that, though, has she not?" asked Mr. Stewart, who was beginning to think his visitor carried his ideas of politeness a little too far.

"Very ill; but she is now out of danger."

"Do you think of bringing her up to town?"

"That will be a question for her mother to decide."

"Was there ever such a prig before!" thought the director; but he said out loud, "Then you take nothing to do with such minor matters?"

"Nothing," answered Arthur, decidedly; "my wife has had a vast amount of anxiety concerning the child, and I should not like to interfere; though, I should think," added the Squire, "that if once we could get her up to London and under better medical treatment, she would soon be well again."

"Why do you not take a doctor down to see her?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"The expense," murmured his guest.

"True, I had forgotten," said the director apologetically; but while he meditatively finished his tea, he

remembered the money Arthur had advanced to Mr. Black, and spent uselessly on the purchase of the house he now proposed occupying.

"I presume that, whether or not Mrs. Dudley come to town at once, you can enter on the duties of your new post immediately?" Mr. Stewart said, at length.

"Certainly; if my wife be afraid of leaving home, one of my sisters must come up and keep house for me."

"You have sisters, then?"

This was enough; that question speedily loosened Arthur's tongue; on that portion of his family history he was never — the chance of speaking being given to him — dumb.

"Yes, he had sisters, but they were not his own, they were sisters by a second marriage. His father had made a most imprudent choice of a wife without money or connection, who brought five children into the world that I," said Arthur, "have had to clothe, educate, and support. That is what has kept me a poor man. For thirteen years I have had that burden to carry. You cannot wonder at my being as I am. One of the boys has now got a situation, but he is only earning thirty pounds a year, and that will not do much towards keeping him. You perceive how necessary it is for me to add to my income. With my own children growing up, it is impossible for me to avoid feeling uneasy."

"Your sisters will marry?" suggested Mr. Stewart.

"I do not know who is to marry them," said Arthur, ruefully.

"People do not know generally, until the right man comes," said the bachelor, laughing.

Arthur struck him as being eminently absurd. It was long since he had come in contact with a man he more thoroughly despised; but, all unconscious of the impression he was producing, Arthur went on talking of his grievances, of how badly fortune had treated him, and Mr. Stewart encouraged such talk. He wanted to know of what stuff his companion was made; and so Arthur proceeded, without the faintest idea crossing his mind that he was revealing himself all the while in a most unfavourable light; that there was not a speck, or flaw, or weak point, in his most weak character, which his host was not examining critically and cynically.

Away from Heather, away from that most beautifying influence, which made even his faults seem errors, to be lightly viewed and tenderly treated for the sake of the love she bore him; away from the wife, who was unto him as a crown giving some faint semblance of man's royalty to that poor weak brow, Arthur stood confessed for what he was — a feeble, impulsive, wearisome, selfish egotist, who had a quarrel with the world, because, while it contained rich and poor, and he did not stand amongst the former; who laid the burden of his ill-success on every back save his own; who would not look on the bright side of his actual existence, but had suffered himself to be led away after a will-o'-the-wisp by Mr. Black, and who lacked, as Mr. Stewart delicately implied to him, sense and energy sufficient to make a good thing of his life, and a good income out of Berrie Down.

"You have no rent to pay," said the director; "it seems to me you might have got a fortune out of that lovely place of yours, had you only gone to work thoroughly."

"How?" asked Arthur, helplessly.

"How? why, how do other people make money out of land — make money and pay heavy rents into the bargain? Do not think me impertinent, if I say I would rather have trusted to the sense and gratitude of Berrie Down Hollow than of Mr. Black."

Arthur could not help thinking Mr. Stewart not merely impertinent but foolish, although he replied,

"I do not think there is much money to be made by farming."

"Don't you!" said Mr. Stewart. "I fancy I have made more money by farming than by anything else; but, however, no doubt you know your own business best — every man does."

Arthur imagined he did, at any rate; nevertheless, he left Mr. Stewart with a certain depression of spirit, which was, however, in due time chased away by Mr. Black.

"Come up again!" said that gentleman. "No, you need not; deuce a bit of necessity for anything of the kind. Leave all to me. I'll see the house is ready for you; Mrs. Black will send in a charwoman, and all that sort of thing. I shouldn't move even a table from Berrie Down; nothing but plate and linen. No use breaking up a home. You'll want to run down there occasionally from Saturday till Monday. We'll all run down. Should not go to the expense; you will furnish as cheaply as you could move your sticks. Leave all to me. I'll not put you to unnecessary expense; but you know you must have decent furniture about you. Servants! Oh, better let Mrs. Dudley see to them — whatever messenger we have can be made useful as footman also, remember. You'll charge him to the

Company, as well as coals, gas, taxes, and so forth. By Jove! Dudley, it will be a first-rate thing for you. Living free, as one may say, and drawing a thousand a year. I'll get the painters and paper-hangers in at once, and report progress. The place shall be ready for you in a fortnight. There, there, no thanks; tut, tut, man, don't make a fuss over such a trifle. Good-bye! Remember me to Mrs. Dudley. Good-bye!" and, amid much waving of hands and excited adieux, the train steamed out of the station, and Arthur was off for Palinsbridge, while Mr. Black returned to the City.

All the way down Arthur thought how he should best break the news to Heather. It seemed to him now, that if he had only made a confidante of her all along, his way would have proved easier. He should now have to tell her the whole from the beginning, or at least as much of the whole as he ever meant to tell her. How he had listened to the voice of the charmer; how the charmer had given him shares in the Protector Bread Company, Limited; how he had been offered the secretaryship of that thriving company; how he thought a thousand a year much too good a chance to be refused; how he had promised Mr. Stewart to enter on his duties at once; how there was a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, rented by the Company, which they were to inhabit.

He would have to tell her all this, but he need tell her no more; he need not add how foolish and trustful he had been; he need make no mention of bills or money; there was no necessity for him to say anything about the house in Lincoln's Inn, which he had purchased.

As for Berrie Down, to which some one must see,

could not Mrs. Piggott take charge of it? Mrs. Piggott and Ned. Suppose Ned and Mrs. Piggott made a match of it.

Mrs. Piggott had, indeed, if all accounts were to be believed, led her deceased husband such a "devil of a life," that he was glad, after three years' patient endurance of her temper, to skulk under ground to get rid of it; but then those days lay very far back in the woman's life; she had been forced to struggle with the world; she had buried two children; she had "supped sorrow with the spoon of grief," and there are some natures to whom sorrow taken in any form proves a very wholesome medicine.

It had done so in Mrs. Piggott's case; the years had softened her, tamed her spirit, subdued her temper. She would have made a very good wife to any one wanting an elderly managing woman to cook his dinner and keep his house tidy; a very good wife indeed for Ned, who had worshipped his lost and lamented Polly — a "fine woman," large, well-developed, and handsome, whose only fault was mildly represented by Ned to have been, that her delicate health obliged her to take more gin than was always good for her.

Like Mr. Piggott, Polly had long been slumbering where gin is not procurable; and thus Squire Dudley's idea concerning a match being got up between the pair was perfectly feasible, and likely, so he thought, to meet the views of all parties interested in the matter.

Mrs. Piggott was faithful and trustworthy. So also was Mr. Edward Byrne, a gentleman of Irish extraction on his father's side — a soft, willing, hardworking fellow, full of odd sayings, and possessed of unfailing spirits, which kept him continually at high pressure, and

ready at all times for anything, "from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter."

Byrne could saddle a horse, and ride it afterwards; harness one or a pair, and drive it or them likewise; he could churn and he would pump; he darned his own stockings, and he cobbled his own shoes. He was always up betimes in the morning, and could be depended on to see to the feeding of the sheep and the foddering of the cattle. To Ned was intrusted the key of the oat-bin, and he always presided over the brewing of the ale. It was he who had the mowers at work by four o'clock in the summer's mornings, whilst the grass was still wet and heavy with dew; he who stacked the oats and went to market for Squire Dudley. And yet, Ned was not proud. Mrs. Piggott objected to young men and boys about the house, so he did not disdain cleaning the knives and polishing the boots, singing to himself all the while like a perfect nightingale, or else talking to Mrs. Piggott or the servants, and recounting to them tales of a far remote period in his life when he was "devil" in a printing-office, and had to "cut about" with proof.

Then, Ned had acquired literary tastes and a knowledge of minstrelsy, which made him a perfect treasure at harvest-homes, sheep-shearings, and such-like. Amongst his class he was considered an orator, and it is greatly to be questioned whether Mario was ever more warmly applauded than Mr. Byrne, when at the festive board he "favoured the company" with "Auld Lang Syne."

A true diplomatist, he always selected songs which would bear a chorus, well knowing that the true secret of personal popularity is to induce every one to believe that some portion of that popularity is reflected on him or her.

A man is, as a rule, much more heartily clapped when the audience feel they are clapping themselves at the same time — clapping their own talents, sentiments virtues; and Ned's admirers accordingly stamped their feet, and hammered on the table with their spoons and knives in precise proportion as the chorus to Mr. Byrne's melody had been long, loud, and discordant.

After leaving the printing-office, which he quitted, because, as he stated, the hours kept by authors were bad for his constitution, he obtained a situation with a lawyer residing in the Temple, whose hours proved to be still worse than those affected by the authors with whom Ned had previously associated.

"You might get some sleep in the one case, drop off in the hall, or have forty winks sitting on the stairs, but with Mr. Froom there was rest neither day nor night," he said; so, finding that town habits were not to his mind, that he had to work harder in London than "anybody ever was asked to work in the country," Ned, then a stunted, pale-faced, sickly lad, resolved to cut the undesirable acquaintance of members both of the literary and legal professions, and return home to those peaceful shades where, in former days, he had digested fat bacon, cheese in quantity, and —

"Home-made bread
As heavy as lead;"

to say nothing of various other delicacies: such as batter and Yorkshire puddings, treacle roll-up, bubble-and-squeak, toad-in-the-hole, harslet-pie, and liver-and-crow — fearful combinations, which are all as appetising to the agricultural classes as the daintiest dishes of a French *chef* to the upper ten thousand.

Upon this fare, Ned, in the pure country air, throve

and grew apace, and when, in due time, he took service with Major Dudley, of Berrie Down, he was a fine, strapping fellow, willing and able to do almost anything in the way of farm labour, and not above putting his hand to whatever his hand found to do. He had been "odd and useful man" at Berrie Down so long back as the memory of Arthur Dudley extended. His hair had grown grey from the passage of years spent at the Hollow, and not, as he facetiously informed young women, from its having stayed out too long in the wet one night and got mouldy.

He was faithful and unambitious; but, nevertheless, he had money to the good in South Kemms Bank, — a fact which it is fortunate Mr. Black never suspected, or he might, in the course of his wanderings over the farm, and long discourses with Ned, have induced him to go in for shares, and inoculated man as well as master with a mania for speculation.

Mrs. Piggott, likewise, had saved money. Why should the pair not marry, and unite their common earnings against the day when more work for either would be impossible? Ned would make a good husband to any woman; Mrs. Piggott would see to his meals and his comforts, and, perhaps, not be too hard upon him if he did take a pint too much ale at any of the rustic gatherings.

Why should they not marry? why, at all events, should they not be put in charge? That is, if Heather objected, as Arthur feared she would, to leaving the girls and Cuthbert at the Hollow; while he, and she, and Lally, and Leonard, went up to town.

"Fact is," was the solemn truth with which Squire Dudley came home after his mental excursion, "I never

ought to have married. See how it ties a man at the most important crisis of his life!"

Having arrived at which pleasant conclusion, Arthur reached Palinsbridge, where Ned and a horse awaited him.

As he rode homeward he pondered over and over how he should best "break the news" to Heather. Any one following his train of reflection might have thought Mrs. Dudley was a perfect virago, so much did her husband dread her reception of the intelligence that he had accepted the secretaryship, and meant, for the future, to reside in London.

Almost he wished he had asked Mr. Black to come down and make the communication for him. He knew Heather would not scold, or nag, or strive to render him miserable about the matter, but he knew also she would feel hurt at his reserve, his secrecy, his want of trustfulness.

Long ago she had asked him not to let them drift away one from the other — what had she meant by that? Was it possible Heather should ever become reserved towards him? that her love should ever grow less? her devotion ever dwindle and die away altogether? Was what his aunt had told him at Copt Hall true? — "You will not be able to retain Heather's affection for ever, Arthur, if you give her none in return. You have got a wife such as no man ever found before; take care lest you sustain a loss such as no man ever can repair."

What did it mean? Arthur Dudley pulled up his horse to a walk, and asked himself this question as he entered Berrie Down Lane.

He had heard men say they never valued a

mother's love till it could be given to them never more. Was this what Miss Hope desired to imply? Did she think Heather delicate? Did she imagine there was any fear of her fading away and leaving him? What would his life be without Heather? Who would ever again bear with him, think for him, love him, like the woman whom he now feared to face, — whom he now rode slowly, on to meet, slowly though he knew she was waiting and watching for his arrival?

What a game of cross-purposes love is altogether! What a stake some people throw down on the board, what despairing losers many walk forth again into the world!

Make your game, gentlemen, make your game, it is all a matter of business! The world must not stand still, even though hearts be broken.

Make your game! The game is made, and here is the result: a great intellect mated to a fool, a fond woman mismatched with a weak, or brutal, or unloving husband!

What, complaining? You played for happiness and you have lost. There are other gamblers coming forward — pray stand aside.

Or it is a lottery, and the people come up to draw. Only a doll, only an idiot, a shrew, a tyrant, a faithless husband, a coquettish wife, a plausible pretender: a woman all paint and padding, all affectation and extravagance, — a man polished enough in his manners, yet coarse and repulsive in the ordinary course of every-day domestic life!

And you grumble? Pray, Sir, and Madam, did you not pay your money and take your chance? Have you not drawn *something* out of the matrimonial lottery?

It does not suit you? Oh! we can have no exchanges here! there are your goods, take them. "Here's a lottery in which no man draws a blank!" and so forth till the end of time; so forth, while the men and the women go home with their purchases, and shrine them or curse them, according as the goods suit or their tempers incline.

What a game of cross-purposes! what a lottery of incongruous chances! What a singular thing that Arthur and Heather should ever have married! What a still more marvellous affair, that only after the years, the possibility should occur to him of her affection weakening, of her love decaying!

What an awful mistake it is men and women alike make, when they imagine that because love has been, love will be, always!

As though there were any human attachment which constant dropping could not wear away; as though the devotion existed which neglect and distrust, unkindness and coldness, would not ultimately alienate!

Can the tendrils go on for ever feeling after a support which is removed from them? Will there not come a day when they will either wither away, or otherwise turn elsewhere for something around which to twine? Was that what Miss Hope meant? or did she only intend to imply that one day, when he wanted the love, and the help, and the companionship he now spurned, he should stretch forth his hands in vain to meet only vacancy?

Strange things often ride beside a man, keep his company in the night watches, walk with him along the familiar paths; strange things, the ghosts of "what has been," the shadows of "what is to be;" and it was

most probably a mixture of both these phantoms that caused Squire Dudley to spur his horse, shying in the moonlight — on — and to push forward more rapidly under the elms und the beeches, beside the hedgerows, bare of flower and leaf, across the gleaming brook — home.

Where Heather was waiting for him with the old glad look of welcome in her face, with the soft pleading tone in her voice, with the half timid touch laid on his shoulder, "so pleased to see him home again," she said; "so thankful to be able to tell him Lally was better — much better, and she herself quite rested. Had he been well, and had he settled his business satisfactorily?" He was seated before the fire by this time with his top-coat off, and his feet stretched out towards the warmth.

He was at home, and the little bustle of arrival over. The inevitable moment had come at last — the moment when, if he ever were to tell his wife of the impending change, the communication must be made.

And yet, looking round, it did seem hard to break up that pleasant home, to leave the familiar places, and strive to set up the household gods of Berrie Down on a strange shrine — in strange niches.

The shadows which had pursued him up the Lane must have entered at the open door and sat down beside the Squire, for there was something, not merely of dread, but also of regret, in his heart, when turning, he said to Heather, —

"I have news for you."

"Good news," she said; "anything about Bessie?"

"No, nothing to do with any one but ourselves. As for whether my news be good or bad, I cannot tell, for that will depend somewhat on how you take it.

What should you say if I told you I had added a thousand a year to our income?"

"I should say it was almost too good to be true," she answered.

"But it is true," he said, "only there is one drawback — we must leave Berrie Down."

"Leave Berrie Down!" she repeated.

"I do not mean leave it entirely," he explained; "but still, for a considerable part of each year, it will be necessary for us to reside in town. We shall have a large house there, rent free, and ——"

"Tell me what it all means, Arthur," she said, interrupting his confused sentence. "Begin at the beginning, and explain it to me. Where is this thousand a year coming from? Why is it necessary we should live in town?"

She knelt down beside him as she spoke: knelt down, and leaning her elbows on the arm of the chair he occupied, looked up in his face, with those lovely, pleading, sad eyes, that had still the brooding sorrow in them.

For the first time, that expression struck Arthur painfully; that expression of all not being happy in her life, which it is so bitter a thing to behold in the face of any one near and dear to us; that expression of terrible though almost unconscious loneliness, which is so pitiful, so pathetic, we can scarcely look upon it without tears.

Once more let me paint her for you as she kneels there in the fire-light, — let me paint her in the very prime of her womanhood, with the rich warm tints of her hair contrasting against her clear white skin, with her small ears peeping out from below the heavy braids

which were wreathed round and round her head, with her face uplifted towards Arthur, her lips parted, her hands clasped, and that pleading look in her eyes — that look which had in it something of a dumb appeal — of an entreaty, which, although the heart could conceive, the tongue refused to utter.

Before he could answer her, Arthur had to turn his head away, and fix his eyes on the dancing fire-light. Passing through the world's long picture gallery, it is oftentimes not the great paintings, not the court ceremonials, not the huge sea pieces, not the representations of battle-fields, not the important portraits and the historical incidents which are photographed on our memories, which are stamped on our mental retina so indelibly, that through the years they are never forgotten. It is not the large finished pictures which we went out to see, which we took, perhaps, much notice of at the time, that stay with us and remain in our memories longest; rather it is the figure of some beggar child, the little glimpse of woodland scenery, the barren bleakness of some desolate moor, the hopeless languor of a dying man's hand, — these are the trifles which, God knows why, we carry away with us. The scenes of great account at which we have been present, on which we have gazed, in which, perchance, we have been actors, pale and fade away from the canvas of our brains; but so long as memory remains, there are slight gestures and passing expressions which recur to us again and again, and which will recur, till life leave us and the mould be heaped up over the spot where we lie.

The tone of a voice, the look in a face, the pressure of a hand, a chance word spoken in love or in

anger, a stray sentence in a book — these things stay with us when, to our thinking, weightier matters are forgotten, when the passions and the sorrows, the struggles and the successes of the years departed have come to be in our recollections but as a flower which has bloomed — a leaf which has faded.

Many a time in the after-days, when all the important events and exciting interviews of that period of his life had become blurred and indistinct, there would rise up before Arthur Dudley's mental sight a vision of a woman kneeling beside him in the fire-light, of a soft, tender voice entreating him to tell her all — of white hands clasped tightly, in mute supplication — of eyes uplifted, pleading for a fuller confidence, for more perfect faith and love.

Did he give her any one of the things she thus silently asked for? Ah! it is hard for a man who has started on a wrong road to retrace his steps; it is well-nigh impossible for any one who has been led on, and on, from less to more, from little to much, to go back to the beginning, and explain circumstantially how he has gradually become entangled, deeper and deeper; how, meaning to put forth for only a short sail, he has drifted away to lands he never intended visiting — to shores where he encountered strange people and formed undesirable acquaintances, destined to change the whole course of his life, to make a difference in his career here, and, it may be—who can tell?—in his state hereafter.

So he was not frank, and the chance of a full and free understanding between the husband and wife ebbed back among the waves, to be restored by them no more.

He told her precisely what he had determined to tell: he said he had been offered the secretaryship;

that he considered it too good a proposal to refuse, and so he closed with it at once. He was eloquent concerning the relief such a salary must bring; he described all the advantages a residence in town would ensure; was fluent about the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields — the wide staircase, the lofty rooms, the airy situation, the pleasant gardens of the Square; and then he wound up by saying, that the only drawback to his perfect happiness and contentment in the matter, was his fear lest Heather should object to living in town — lest, being so much attached to Berrie Down, she should dislike leaving it.

As he said this he took courage and turned and looked at her, and, behold! the sad, lonely expression was gone, and another, more difficult, perhaps, to analyze, had come in its place.

"Arthur," she answered, and the low, sweet voice — in which, as I wrote once before, there was a great virtue of leisure — was broken neither by sorrow nor passion, as she spoke, "I love Berrie Down much, but I love you better; I had not seen this place when I married you. You need not be afraid of it parting us now."

And that was all! The dreaded confession was made, and this was how she took it. Could anything have been quieter, calmer, more satisfactory? Yes; if she had been vexed and angry, Arthur could have understood her better. If she had cross-questioned him, and uttered reproaches about his not having previously made a confidante of her, he would have escaped that sense of something being amiss which fell like ice upon his heart.

He could not know what a world of feeling was

contained in the short sentence she had uttered. How should he know? this man who never took his wife in his arms, when she said she loved him better than Berrie Down; nor told how she was more to him than houses and lands — than gold and silver; who allowed her to rise from the ground and stand looking steadfastly into the fire, and only marvelled what she could be thinking of — where on earth her mind was wandering.

Already that scene was for both of them a thing of the past; already the lichens and the mosses of memory were growing around, and taking the fresh bareness off it, destroying the harshness of the cold, grey outline.

But half an hour before, and the news had still to be imparted; and now the tidings were told and received, and all difficulty was over; all doubt of her concurrence removed.

Down the gallery of Time already the footsteps of the past were echoing, carrying away that scene from memory, in order to fling it into the lumber-room containing life's unused opportunities.

It had been with him but a moment before to be employed as a shield and a buckler, as a safeguard from trouble, as a sword against the enemy; and, behold, the man was so blind, so feeble, so incompetent, as to let it slip from his fingers, and glide away to be seized and borne off, and recalled no more, save in sorrowful memories with unavailing regrets.

For when return to the land is impossible, even the most reckless will perceive the extent of the danger he has courted, and stretch forth his hands despairingly towards that fair shore which is receding from his gaze for ever.

CHAPTER V.

Leaving Berrie Down.

The programme of domestic arrangements which Arthur Dudley had so ingeniously sketched out, as he travelled from London to Palinsbridge, was, like many other programmes, destined to undergo much revision before being presented to the public.

In the first place, Mrs. Piggott's prudence, or possibly, even her morality, objected to being left alone with Ned at Berrie Down in charge of that establishment. A house without a mistress had always been Mrs. Piggott's special abhorrence, — a house where things, as she said, "ran wild."

Further, Mrs. Dudley most earnestly desired that if her lot were to be cast in town, it should not be cast there in company with strange servants; and, after much anxious discussion, it was accordingly agreed that Susan should take Mrs. Piggott's position, and a new housemaid be engaged to fill Jane's place, while Prissy and Jane and Mrs. Piggott accompanied the family to London. As an almost necessary consequence of this arrangement, it was decided that Agnes and Laura should remain at the Hollow; Agnes willingly undertaking to "see to things" as much as possible, and write Heather an account of the farm proceedings every week.

Ned, of course, was to take charge of out-door matters, as hitherto; and Lucy and Cuthbert were to proceed to town.

It seemed to Mr. Black, when he heard these various decisions, that the whole family must suddenly have taken leave of their senses.

"Why the deuce you could not have put in a care-taker, and sold the cows, and got rid of all the poultry, and let that Ned fellow see to the ploughing and sowing, passes my comprehension. The girls will never get married down there; why, I don't suppose they see a man from one year's end to another!"

"There is one of them coming up, remember," said Arthur Dudley, in a tone of apology, as though some excuse were necessary for not putting his sisters in the way of matrimonial chances; "and Heather and they settled it, somehow, amongst them. It appeared to me rather a good arrangement."

"Well, it may be, if you wish to have them on your hands for ever," answered Mr. Black; at which remark Arthur bit his lip.

He did not like being interfered with, or advised overmuch. If he wished his sisters to stay at Berrie Down, what business was it of Mr. Black's whether they remained there or not? He had maintained them when no other member of the family could or would have done so, and he did not see that any person had a right to make comments on what he did or left undone.

"You need not look crusty, Squire," proceeded Mr. Black; "what I said is merely my opinion, and you may take it for what it is worth; only I consider it to be a confoundedly bad plan to have two establishments, and so I tell you. I would shut up Berrie Down, and move the whole party, bag and baggage, to town. That is what I should do; but, of course, you can do as you like."

"Yes; and that is what I intend to do: much obliged, at the same time, for your kind permission."

"Hoity-toity!" said Mr. Black, taking off his hat, and bowing low as he spoke; — it was in one of the empty rooms of Arthur's house in Lincoln's Inn Fields that this conversation occurred, — "hoity-toity! your most obedient, sir, and humbly beg pardon for the liberty."

In a pet, Arthur turned away, and walking to one of the windows, looked out over the Square, while Mr. Black regarded him with a smile, in which there lurked not merely amusement, but also triumph and contempt.

"You're a nice chicken, you are," thus ran the promoter's secret thought; "and you have a sweet temper, Mister Squire Dudley; and you think you are able to manage your affairs, though anybody, willing to take the trouble, might put a ring through your nose, and lead you from here to Jericho. And so you intend to do as you like! It will be as *I* like before we have done with one another, I fancy; a conceited, upsetting ass!"

But Mr. Black was much too wise a man to allow even a word of all this to pass his lips. He had his game still to play; and he would not mar the chances of success by any irritated or indiscreet remark.

"Come, Dudley," he said, "we are not going to quarrel over trifles, are we? I meant no offence, and am sorry if you have taken any. I have knocked about the world too much to be as mealy-mouthed as most of your acquaintances, but I should be as sorry to vex you, perhaps, as any of them. I am glad you like the papers I have chosen; you will find everything

in apple-pie order when you bring up Mrs. Dudley and the children. So your wife is going to try moving Miss Lally? I am glad of it; I believe she will get well in half the time in town."

That was what Heather trusted also; she hoped that some of the great doctors in London would be able to do more for her little girl in a month than the general practitioner at Fifield had effected in five. Every one told her she was doing the wisest thing possible in taking Lally to town! every one was so kind and good!

Mrs. Poole Seymour sent her carriage to convey mother and child to the station, and Mr. Plimpton was at Palinsbridge, ready to conduct Lally across the bridge, and deposit her safely in the compartment he had secured for the travellers.

Miss Baldwin promised to call upon the girls "very often," and said she should not "forget to find her way to Lincoln's Inn when in town;" while Mrs. Raidsford came lumbering over in the great family chariot, and, not to be outdone in neighbourly thoughtfulness and delicate consideration, brought Heather a basket of the worst grapes growing in the Moorlands conservatory, and offered to lend her "one of the footmen," if he could be of any service in seeing to her luggage.

It was fortunate for Heather she had, towards the last, so many people to see, so many things to occupy and distract her mind, or else that parting from Berrie Down, when the spring flowers were budding, when the fresh leaves were clothing all the trees, when the birds were singing on every branch and bough, must almost have broken her heart.

She loved the spring-time — that time which always seems more full of hope, and joy, and life, and promise than any other period in the year. It had been her delight, ever since she came to Berrie Down, to watch the buds gradually forming, to peep with the children at the nests, where eggs, speckled, and blue, and white, and green, were covered by birds that rarely took fright at sight of the familiar faces; to her, the lambing season was the pleasantest of the four — the long, long summer stretched away beyond the spring, and the rich, glowing autumn beyond that, and all these good things were to be had and enjoyed before the winter, with its leafless trees, with its snows and frosts, with its rain and storms, came again to Berrie Down.

To any person passionately fond of the country, of its sights, and sounds, and pleasures, the coming of spring is as the beginning of a feast, as the sunrise on the morning of a bright glad holiday. To Heather, this had always been the happiest, most delicious time at Berrie Down — these months when the lambs commenced to dot the fields, when the daisies perked up their faces among the green grass, when the hyacinths began to bud in the dells, when the "sunny celandine" opened on the hedge-bank, when the children gathered branches of the crab-apple, when the first broods of chickens chipped their shells and went chirruping and scratching about the warmest corners of the farm-yard — when the sun really had some power, when the fruit-trees were in blossom and the lilacs showed for flower, when the tiger-lily reared its head in the garden, when every hedge-row was clad in its fresh robe of green, and there was that nameless scent of spring per-

vading that air — that scent with which the summer odours vainly strive to compete.

With a new sense of happiness upon her, with a sensuous delight in the soft balmy air, in the fragrance which pervaded the atmosphere, in the sunny smile which shone on the face of Nature, in the sudden stir which there seemed on every bough, in every blade of grass — Heather, I say, when all the things I have mentioned came to pass, would stand at the open window of the drawing-room, looking down over the Hollow, and away to the woods surrounding Kemms' Park, repeating to herself the while —

"The winter is past — the rain is over and gone — the flowers appear on the earth — the time for the singing-birds is come — and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land."

And now this time was come, and she had to leave it behind.

Just when the hawthorn-buds were forming — when the chestnut-trees were clothing themselves in great masses of foliage, to be relieved presently and lighted up with cone after cone of pure white flowers — when the laburnums were about loosening their golden curls, and the lilacs bethought themselves of filling the air with a delicious fragrance — when the westeria was hanging out its purple clusters, and the pyracanthas at the gate were a perfect sheet of bloom — when the white anemone and the starry stitchwort dotted the woods — when everything was looking its loveliest, and brightest, and purest, Heather was compelled to leave the place her heart had grown to during the years of her married life.

For some time previously, Arthur had been resident

in town; but Mrs. Dudley, having many preparations to make, many arrangements to complete, remained at Berrie Down, not merely until the spring blossoms were come, but also until Lally was sufficiently recovered to travel.

The child still kept weakly and delicate; her once tireless limbs now refused to carry her for any long period. If she started to run along one of the garden walks, she soon returned to her mother with, "Carry me, pease — legs ache." The colour did not return to her cheeks, nor strength to her body, neither did she get plump and soft again, as Heather hoped would have been the case.

The poor wasted arms, and little white face, and thin slight figure, had a pleading pitifulness about them, which the child's eager desire for exercise, her unquenched vivacity, made more pathetic still.

Whatever Lally saw any other creature doing, that she desired to essay also. She wanted to run after the lambs, and scamper like the dogs, and be out over the fields with Cuthbert, and trotting behind Agnes and Mrs. Piggott, to dairy, and poultry-yard, and paddock; but it was not to be! The spirit was there — strong, restless, excitable as ever; but the body was changed. No more gallops for Lally on any one's shoulder — no more charming excursions in Ned's wheelbarrow — no more clambering up ladders, and lofty thrones on the top of hay-stacks and corn-ricks — no more playing at hide-and-seek in the hollow — no more running after the ducks, and shrill laughter at seeing them take to the water in order to escape the pursuit of their tiny persecutor — no more searchings after hens that had stolen away to lay — no more of these old hap-

pinesses for Lally. Sickness had caught her one day, when his advent was least looked for — caught and put her in a cage, which would not permit her to move far in any direction, against the bars of which the little restless heart fluttered and beat only to its own hurt — a cage from which no human hand could release her, though loving friends were all around, and kindly eyes, often with tears in them, regarded the impatient child.

Tired — tired — always tired! Many and many a time, when Heather, hearing this plaint, lifted her child in her arms, she had to turn aside lest Lally should see she was weeping; but one day Lally, peeping round, beheld the tears on her mother's face, and said —

"'Oo crying, ma? — is it about Lally? Big, fat lady told Lally she'll get some-sing when she goes to London, that will make her better as well. When are we going, ma — when?"

And because her own hopes were identical with Lally's words, Mrs. Dudley did not grieve so much concerning leaving Berrie Down as might otherwise have been the case. As regarded the increase of income, the prospect of greater pecuniary comfort, Heather felt no elation whatever.

If Arthur were satisfied, she could easily make herself satisfied also; but she had little faith that anything in which Mr. Black figured as prime mover would ultimately prove advantageous to her husband.

Besides, if a person have half a million a year, he can but be happy; and Heather knew perfectly well that the secret of being happy, even on two hundred a year, is to be satisfied therewith.

Arthur had never been contented, and she was quite aware that the increase to his income could not make him so. She understood her busband's peculiarities sufficiently by this time to know that his wants would only grow with what they fed on.

If Mr. Black's cry were always more capital, Arthur's had always been a larger revenue.

Looking back over her married life with eyes from which the glamour of early love was now completely cleared away, Heather saw that money matters might have been better with them for years past, had Arthur only been energetic, and strong, and determined, like other men — had he finished his draining instead of leaving it half completed — had he turned up his land and laid out money by degrees, as he could spare it, on that which never proves ungrateful for capital wisely expended, for care judiciously bestowed.

She could not be blind to the fact that, as a rule, they had bought stock dear and sold it cheap — that what Alick had often said, "Arthur is neither master nor man: neither master to give orders and see them carried out, nor man to obey orders if given by anybody else," was true.

There was no fairy mist hanging before her mental vision now. Like Mr. Stewart, she feared the person who could not make money at Berrie Down, plainly and economically as they had lived for years, would not be likely to make or to keep much money elsewhere. Certainly the thousand a year was something tangible — a peg on which to hang her faith, had any faith been left; but, like most women who have passed all the most important years of their lives in

the country, Heather entertained a perfect horror of the expenses of living in town.

She did not believe one sentence of what Mr. Black said about an income going as far there as in the country. She knew, no one better, how very small a money outlay had sufficed to maintain the family at Berrie Down comfortably and respectably.

Those only who have eaten of the fat of their own lands, and beheld the wheat growing which is afterwards to be ground into flour — who have scarcely missed from amongst the rough abundance of all farm produce, the poultry and milk, the butter, eggs, hams, vegetables, and meat necessary for the consumption even of a large family — can tell what a very difficult thing it is to cater for an establishment in town, where everything, to the country imagination, seems sold according to its weight in gold — where a housekeeper's hand is never out of her pocket from one week's end to another — where it is either bills or cash, but, in any case, ultimately money — where even a few sprigs of parsley, even a bunch of savoury herbs, cannot be procured without purchase, without going through the ceremony of buying that which, at the old home, grew wild, almost, along the sunniest borders — wild, to be had for the mere trouble of gathering.

Of that mongrel country life which exists in the suburbs of great towns, and which has given rise to various sayings concerning home-laid eggs at a shilling a-piece, carrots at half-a-guinea the bunch, butter half-a-crown a pound, and milk eighteen-pence a quart, Heather had no experience. She only knew that her father's glebe lands and Arthur's farm had enabled

their respective families to make both ends meet, without pinching in the parlour, or an over-strict and painful economy in the kitchen; and she dreaded entering on what was to her an utterly untried career — that of managing a town establishment, and entering every item, from cream to laundry work, in her formerly easily-kept house-keeping book.

All these matters she had discussed, after a woman's diffuse fashion, with Agnes and Mrs. Piggott; and Agnes and Mrs. Piggott had both agreed that much might still be forwarded from Berrie Down; that it would only be Ned's time and the pony's to run over to Palinsbridge with a weekly hamper for town; "and besides, you will be often down yourself, I hope, Heather," added Agnes; but Heather shook her head.

"The expense," she said, "will be more than I should like to incur frequently. I am afraid, although a thousand a year sounds a great deal, it will not go very far in London, more especially in the style Arthur talks of living."

"But his shares, you know, Heather?" suggested Agnes, hopefully.

"Yes, I had forgotten them," was the reply, evidently intended to be affirmative of the girl's cheerful views, but failing of its purpose, because Mrs. Dudley's tone implied that, now she did remember the shares, her spirits were not unduly raised.

She had heard too many revelations from Mrs. Black to be mightily exalted at the idea of being even indirectly connected with a company. That lady had favoured her with too many descriptions of how they had "up and down," "seeing and sawing," for Mrs.

Dudley's heart to flutter at the prospect of wealth suddenly spread out before them.

"If it was here to-day, it was gone to-morrow," Mrs. Black had sadly lamented; "and, while it was here, we had nothing but anxiety; and when it was there, we had a trouble to keep the wolf from the door. I am sure, my dear, what I have gone through would make a history."

Heather Dudley not having the slightest desire to go through experiences sufficiently varied and unpleasant to justify any one compiling a history concerning her, would, had the choice been offered, decidedly have preferred remaining where there was no chance of such ups and downs as Mrs. Black mentioned occurring in her life.

The choice, however, not being offered, she had at last no alternative left but to bid adieu to Berrie Down; and, accompanied by Miss Hope, who kindly came up from Tunbridge Wells to "see the last" of her old favourite drive over to Palinsbridge, whence she travelled by one of the afternoon trains to London.

"I told you how it would be," said that Job's comforter, Alithea Hope, spinster, as she and Mrs. Dudley drove along the pleasant country roads to the station — Heather crouched up into one corner of Mrs. Seymour's carriage, so that her child might lie on the seat with her head resting on her mother's lap — "I told you how it would be, if you refused to take my advice; and now I hope you are satisfied at the result of your non-interference principle. Sweetness, and amiability, and submission, and all that kind of thing, are delightful traits, no doubt, in a wife, but they are qualities thrown away on Arthur Dudley —

and so you will find out some day. The kindest thing you could have done to your husband would have been to say:

"'Now, look here, Arthur: if you are resolved to make a fool of yourself, I won't make a fool of myself with you. Go to town if you like, but I stay at Berrie Down. If you are determined to take the bread out of your children's mouths, I am equally resolved we shall not all be left paupers, if I can prevent it; therefore, I mean to remain and manage the farm, and whenever you are tired of your shares and your companies, and your Blacks and your town life, you can come home again.'"

Heather laughed; she was a little hysterical about leaving Berrie Down and all the kind friends she had recently found there, and so even while she laughed the tears came into her eyes again.

The idea of her making such a speech to Arthur; of her taking such a stand and setting her will up in open defiance of his; of her twitting her husband with his decision, and prophesying failure for him! Heather could not choose but laugh, and then she cried; and then Miss Hope told her she was a soft, silly, stupid creature, who had no more business to marry Arthur Dudley than Mr. Raidsford had to marry that great vulgar illiterate dowdy, who "came over in her caravan to see you this morning; you don't want me to speak about Mrs. Raidsford before Lally, — is that the meaning of all those signs? The sooner Lally is taught to repeat nothing she hears, the better; the sooner little girls learn their mouths and ears were given them to be kept tight shut, the more sugar-plums will be bought and popped in be-

tween their little red lips. Are you attending to me, Lally?"

"Iss; but how's me to eat sugar-plums if I keeps mows shut?" inquired Miss Hope's pupil.

"You are to open it at proper times," answered her teacher; "but not to repeat what older people say before you."

"Lally don't 'peat," replied the child, wearily. "Ma, is it far to London now? will it be long before we are there? me so tired — me so tired!"

Whereupon mother and aunt looked at each other, and Miss Hope said, —

"You will send for a doctor soon, Heather; and do try that delightful man I was speaking to you about. His manner with children is quite charming: wins their little hearts, and makes them feel at home with him directly. I am sure, when I went to him with Mrs. Walter Hope about her Charlie's legs, if he had been the boy's father he could not have taken more interest in his case; said he must see him at least once a week, for six months: took the child on his knee, and made himself so pleasant. There was only one stupid remark he made, which surprised me in so clever a man, namely, that he could tell in a moment whose child Charlie was, his likeness to his mother being remarkable. I longed to ask him where his eyes were, for the boy is a Hope, every inch of him, and very like me, — even his own father admits that."

Heather laughed again; she was evidently in a laughing mood, for the slightest thing provoked her merriment. Perhaps it was a comfort to this "silly goose" to discover that even Miss Hope had her weak

points, and could be touched through them like her neighbours; perhaps the description of Charlie's model doctor tickled her fancy; any way she laughed; and Lally, putting up her little hand, patted her mother's cheek, and smiled a weak, faint smile in sympathy, while she asked, —

"Ma, was that 'tild as ill as me?"

"Now I wonder," broke out Miss Hope, "if it be a consequence of 'original sin' that children always speak bad grammar. Is it depravity of our human nature which always confounds the parts of speech, and makes a jumble of the personal pronouns? She never heard bad grammar spoken by any one belonging to her, and only listen to her English; if you can call such a language as she speaks English. You want to know if Charlie was as ill as 'me,'" added the spinster, directly addressing Lally; "yes; and a great deal worse; his legs were like a bow, bent out like that;" and Miss Hope would have practically demonstrated what Charlie's legs were like on Lally's person, but that the child resisted any such experiments being attempted with her limbs. "Positively, Heather, you never saw such a sight as the child was," she continued; "but Doctor Chickton assured Fanny he could make a perfect cure."

"Will he cure me?" asked Lally, egotistical as most sick people are. Months of undivided maternal solicitude, the devotion of a whole household, the visits of ladies vieing one with another who should bring Lally most toys and dainties, had spoiled the child a little, perhaps; or it may be that long illness and a close and undivided consideration of her own ailments, had produced a certain self-consciousness and absorption.

In either case, there can be no question but that Lally was exceedingly sorry for herself, that she felt her case to be a very hard one; and that she was precisely in that state of mind and body which might well tire out any love except a mother's, any patience save that which seems well-nigh inexhaustible.

On the previous day Leonard and Lucy, and Cuthbert, together with Mrs. Piggott and Priscilla Dobbin, had journeyed to town, and now Heather and her first-born were bringing up the rear of the Dudley domestic army. It was a great point that Heather should have nothing to attend to excepting Lally, that she should not be troubled with luggage or parcels, or anything besides the sick child; and all the others being gone before, was a relief to her, so as to obviate the necessity for conversation or movement, or stir or sound, likely to disturb the little girl.

Mr. Plimpton, one of the most good-natured men who ever existed, saw Mrs. Dudley into her compartment, and impressed the guard with the importance of permitting no other passengers to intrude into it.

"The child is very ill indeed," he explained; which explanation he perhaps made clearer by slipping half-a-crown into the man's hand.

"I declare, if it were not that Lady Emily might wonder what had become of me, I would run up to town with you myself, Mrs. Dudley, and see you safe; but I think the guard will take care that no other passengers get in. Good-bye — good-bye, Miss Lally; don't quite forget me, though you are going to live in London. Have you any message for my wife? she will be certain to inquire whether you sent her one."

"Lally's love give her," said the child, who was now all excitement at the bustle, and the noise, and the steam, and the number of the people, and the general variety, — "Lally's love — and a tiss;" and she kissed the tall gentleman, spite of his bushy whiskers and bristling moustache, both articles which ordinarily tried her equanimity and temper not a little.

"That child will never be better," was Mr. Plimpton's summary of Lally's state on his return home. "They may take her where they like, and send for whom they like, but she will never be strong again. Poor Mrs. Dudley believes it to be a question of treatment, but I am confident no treatment will ever put the little creature to-rights."

As for Miss Hope, she drove back to Berrie Down "crying like an idiot," so she informed Agnes all the way. "Dear me, I wish people would not have children," she said; "that Lally is enough to break a person's heart. Why cannot she get strong as any other child would? I declare I am out of patience with her, month after month, and like a bag of bones at the end. And of all things on earth she must set up a lamentation for that Bessie, whom she ought to have forgotten long ago; asking her mother if they should see her in London, and whether she would not be with them always, and sing to her at night. As if Heather were not vexed enough and sad enough without that;" and Miss Hope tossed aside her bonnet, which Laura carried up-stairs, for the spinster was going to stay with the girls for a time, to see how they went on and managed by themselves.

Then came a millennium of "Christian cookery,"

and of "coffee fit to be swallowed;" then Miss Hope was in her element, — a mistress over two young mistresses, who obeyed her implicitly, and allowed her to order Susan about as much as she pleased.

But having one's own way is not always conducive to perfect happiness, being monarch of all one's surveys does not invariably produce perfect contentment. Even a contest with Mrs. Piggott would occasionally have served to break the monotony of being able to do as she pleased, which Miss Hope at length felt to be insupportable; and every day, and a score of times during the course of every day, she repeated that Berrie Down was not Berrie Down without Heather, who, the guard proving faithful to the trust reposed in him, travelled alone to London with Lally, and was met at King's Cross by Alick and Lucy, the former of whom could only say, "Well, mother, this is a happy change for me," as he helped her out of the carriage, and walked beside her along the platform, carrying Lally in his arms.

There was no loneliness about that arrival in the great Babylon, even although Arthur could not meet his wife; — for the strong hands which had smoothed her way, and helped her through many a difficulty at Berrie Down, were stretched forth now to guide and guard her through the midst of the human wilderness whither she had come.

CHAPTER VI.

Not quite Satisfied.

Time went by once more; not as it had done at Berrie Down, smoothly as a calm river gliding noiselessly to the sea, but swiftly and excitedly, splashing among the stones, dashing between rocks, rushing over slight obstacles, eddying round larger impediments, rapid as a mountain stream speeding to the valley, with as great a roar and hurry and excitement as that wherewith water falls from a vast height into the basin it has through the centuries worn for itself below. Thus time sped by in London, so rapidly, so like an arrow cleaving the air, that often Heather's breath was almost taken from her by the swiftness and impetuosity of its passage.

And yet the change was not wholly or even partially unpleasant. There is a great adaptability about some natures which makes the work of transplantation easy and pleasant to accomplish. Their roots are not ungrateful; move them where you will almost, they contrive to extract nourishment from the soil, and put forth their leaves, and their flowers, and their fruits, in the city, as in the field; in the midst of bricks and mortar, as away in the far country where the air is pure and pleasant.

They take good out of all things, whence good is possible to be extracted; they are willing to sing songs in a strange land, and will take down their harps and tune them in whatsoever household their lot is cast.

The man or woman who enjoys one pleasure keenly is not likely to be insensible to another; and therefore, although Heather's first love was her last, still she made herself very contented in London — was amused with the excitement and the variety that surrounded her; went to concerts and theatres with all the pleasure a young girl might have evinced, and conducted herself, on the whole, not merely to the satisfaction of her husband, but also to that of Mr. Black.

Who was now a power not to be despised, a man worth ever so much money, and likely to be worth ever so much more, a man engaged in floating fresh companies, and successful in obtaining grants and concessions, and first refusals, and early information to an extent which it would be quite outside the province of this story to explain more fully.

He had bought a splendid house out at Ealing, and was fitting it up regardless of expense. In Stanley Crescent he gave the most wonderful parties that it had ever entered into Mrs. Dudley's imagination to conceive could be given by any one not possessed of a ducal revenue. She had thought the furniture in Lincoln's Inn Fields far and away more expensive than any Mr. Black should have persuaded Arthur into purchasing, but the promoter assured her it was "all right; upon his sacred word of honour, it had not cost a sixpence more than Dudley was perfectly justified in spending." And when she beheld Adamant House, as Mr. Black's new house at Ealing was happily called, she thought if one of the chiefs of the company could afford such magnificence, their own, by comparison modest establishment, could not be considered "over-

timbered," to quote from the promoter's vocabulary over again.

From room to room she walked, dazzled and bewildered, and Mr. Black walked beside, enjoying her astonishment, and kindly acting as cicerone to her inexperienced country understanding.

"Now, is not this better than grubbing on?" he triumphantly inquired, when, seated in his carriage, they were driving back to Lincoln's Inn. "This is what a man can do who is not afraid, who feels his own strength, and is sure of being able to keep his feet under him. Ay, and by Jove, Dudley shall do as well yet as I have done! He deserves to do well, and so do you, Mrs. Dudley; for a more sensible woman, and one less under the dominion of prejudice, I never met. Many a wife would have striven to keep Dudley back — to dissuade him from coming to London, but you were too wise to attempt such interference, and therefore I say you deserve to succeed, and to have every bit as fine a carriage as this to bowl about in."

Which termination struck Heather as being so intensely ludicrous that she laughed outright, laughed even while she thought gravely enough that, had her interference been likely to produce the slightest good result, she would never have refrained from attempting it. This little explanation, however, being quite unnecessary to offer to Mr. Black, she took his compliment as though she deserved it every word, and laughed while the promoter thought, in his elegant language, "that he had got to the blind side of Mrs. Dudley also, and would be shortly able to wind her round his finger as he had done the Squire."

In those early days, Arthur Dudley certainly proved himself to be as foolish and confiding a gentleman as any rogue need have desired to meet with.

Although he saw the grand house at Ealing, although every morning Mr. Black, *en route* to the City, thundered up to the door of the Protector Company's offices in his carriage and pair, and swaggered and blustered about the place as though the clerks, and the secretary, and the cashier, and the whole concern, in fact, were his own personal and exclusive property, still Arthur never insisted on a settlement of their accounts, never objected to renew bills, never made any difficulty about accepting new ones. He believed implicitly every sentence Mr. Black told him, and had much greater faith in the promoter's genius than in that of his own especial principal, Mr. Stewart, who, having put in a secretary and cashier of his own choosing, now rarely came near the office excepting on special board days, and when he paid formal visits to Mrs. Dudley, who always received him with the uncomfortable feeling, that if he knew who she really was, his calls would be fewer and shorter still.

But at length there came a certain coolness between the promoter and the secretary, which commenced in this wise: —

"Now I tell you what it is, Dudley," said Mr. Black, one day when, for the third time, his kinsman's renewals had been required and effected; "I tell you what it is, — this paper of yours has been through the fire often enough, it will never do to run it on till it gets scorched. You don't know what I mean, I see, but it is just this: a girl may walk out with a man once, and people think nothing about it — they may

have met by accident, no consequence — but if she goes on walking, talk begins, there is some game up. Now, a man's credit is much in the same position. He may renew once or twice, and nobody thinks anything strange of his doing so; if he continue renewing, however, his name gets blown upon, and banks begin — especially if he be in no business — to look askance on his paper. That is your position at the present time; you must not ask for more discount, or, at least, if you do, you will not get it. I have done my best for you this time, and so has Crossenham, but I am greatly afraid we shall not be able to get you passed again."

"Then I suppose you will take up the bills next time?" suggested Arthur.

"I have no objection to taking up those that I have had value for," answered Mr. Black, a little astonished, perhaps, at Arthur's so speedily discovering the weak point in his armour; "but what are you to do with yours? That is the important part of the business, is it not?"

"I do not know," Arthur replied; "I should have supposed one part of it to be about as important as the other."

"Well, you would have supposed wrong, then," retorted Mr. Black; "because, though I am deucedly short, and shall be short for the next twelvemonth, still I could make a pinch of meeting my bills; but how you are to take up yours, until the shares become marketable, I confess puzzles me to imagine — unless, indeed, you decide to raise a few thousands on Berrie Down."

"A few thousands!" repeated Arthur, in amazement,

"a few thousands! Why, my bills altogether cannot amount to more than a few hundreds!"

"Don't they, by Jove!" said Mr. Black, coolly. "Just run your eye over that little list — there is not sixpence of mine among it, — and you will soon change your opinion. You have had a lot of money, one time and another. Then you bought this place; then there is the discount."

"I thought you were going to pay that?" Arthur interrupted.

"On those which were drawn for my accommodation, of course," replied Mr. Black. "I am now talking of yours. Then there was the doing up of this house ——"

"You told me the Company would put it in proper order for me to live in," once again interposed Mr. Dudley.

"So they would, had it been for any other person excepting the owner of the house," answered Mr. Black. "I had, as I told you, to waive that point. I wrote you all about it after you were up at the beginning of the year."

"Indeed, you are mistaken," said Arthur; "you never wrote a syllable to me on the subject!"

"All I can say is, then, that I either wrote or intended to write," answered Mr. Black; "but I had such a deuce of a lot of things to attend to about that time, your letter may have slipped my memory. However, that's nothing to do with what we are talking of now. If you will consider the affair, it was absurd to expect the Company both to pay you rent and to paint and paper your house. They could not do it. I forgot about its being your own property — about your, in

fact, being landlord and our being tenants, till you were back at Berrie Down. We pay you a very good rent, so you must not be dissatisfied. Then, you see, there is the furniture."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Arthur, "you never mean to say that the furniture we have in this house cost twelve hundred and seventy-eight pounds? Where could twelve hundred and seventy-eight pounds worth be put?"

"My dear fellow, how you talk!" said Mr. Black, with a smile of infinite superiority, "why, you might put double the money up in a corner and scarcely see it! Most economical I call the whole arrangement. You have a drawing-room fit to ask anybody into, a grand trichord thingumygig of Erard's, good solid chairs and tables, every room fully carpeted, dinner and dessert services complete, glasses large enough for Buckingham Palace, bed-chambers that you need not mind putting a duke to sleep in — all for twelve hundred odd pounds!"

"But that is more than a year's income," Arthur persisted.

"I beg your pardon — taking rent and everything, it is not nearly a year's income; but, even if it were, the man who can rig a house up like this for a twelve months' pay, is a very fortunate fellow. I told you, I would not run you to a farthing's unnecessary expense, and neither I did. In your position here, in London, it would not do for you to have the same old-fashioned curiosities that served your purpose very well at Berrie Down; besides, the money is not lost, there is the furniture — well kept, it would fetch its cost any day by auction; now tot up those items, and let

us see the sum total. Yes; that is just what I made it, running through the account roughly — four thousand six hundred and eleven pounds, seventeen shillings and nine pence."

"Mr. Black! I never had that sum of money," said Arthur, excitedly.

"If you had not money, you had goods," answered Mr. Black; "but you have had a smartish sum of money too. The pace you have gone at the last twelvemonth has not been a slow one. Those dinners you gave — and the money you spent in town ——"

"But you said the Company would pay all that."

"So it has; you have your shares and your salary, and your good rent for these premises. I never meant direct payment. The idea is absurd. How would an entry like this sound:

"'Dinner at the Wellington, to six desirable City men,' or 'Treating Cadger's managing clerk to the theatre, with supper after,' or 'Stall tickets to the Misses Smithers,' or 'Half a sov. to Jenkins' footman!' Just bring the thing home, Dudley; think how ridiculous it would sound, and don't be unreasonable. You have had your penn'orths, and you will have more — besides, it really is this house and furniture, neither of which is likely to run away, that has walked into the money. Think over the matter, will you? any time during the course of the next two months, and let me know what you decide;" and with that, the promoter was airily taking himself out of the room, when "Black!" sharply spoken by his companion, arrested his departure.

"I never had this money," Mr. Dudley repeated. "I never could have had it; where has it gone — what has been done with it?"

"As for that, Dudley," was the reply — "take my advice, and never waste your time inquiring after spent money. Enough for you, or any man, to know that it has gone — to the tomb of all those people one hears about. No use trying to hold a *post-mortem* examination on the body of a defunct ten-pound note. For the rest, you both could and did have all the sums I have debited you with; they are regularly entered on their dates of payment in my books. First day you are down in the City, call in and check them off. I'd rather you would do so — more satisfactory for us both."

And with this Parthian shot, Mr. Black said "Good-day," and shut the office-door after him, leaving Arthur far too much perplexed and bewildered to consider that a lie can be written as well as spoken, any day in the year, and that the mere fact of an entry to his debit being made on such and such a date, did not by any means of necessity prove that such debt had ever been incurred.

CHAPTER VII.

A Glimpse of the Canvas.

WHETHER the moneys, with a memorandum of which the promoter so obligingly furnished him, had ever come into his hands or not, Arthur Dudley still felt a certain sense of having been cheated — of having been made the cat's-paw wherewith Mr. Black's chestnuts were drawn out of the fire. He knew, although to the letter Mr. Black's statements might be correct, still that in the spirit he had deceived him grossly.

He was perfectly well aware the meaning conveyed to him by the Company "paying all," was that he, Arthur Dudley, should never have to meet a single bill, nor be a penny the worse for the money he had advanced to float the Protector.

Bitterly now he remembered Nellie and his stock — the latter sold at a considerable sacrifice. The young bullocks and the fat beeves, the flocks of sheep, and the lambs which ought to have been kept over the winter, appeared again, and formed a sad procession before his mind's eye. Hay parted with before the price rose at the turn of the year; wheat threshed off and sent to market, when the markets were falling instead of rising; straw disposed of at rates which scarcely left a margin of profit, after deducting cartage and expenses — these things recurred to the Squire's memory, and roused fresh anger in his heart against the man who had led him so grievously astray.

Now he recollected Mr. Stewart's prophetic words,

and cursed that gentleman's clear-sightedness as he did so. Now he recalled those sentences — "I am prepared to lose, and you are not;" "I can afford to wait; you, perhaps, are differently situated;" and they seemed to make his difficulty clear in a moment. "He was not prepared to lose — he was not able to wait." He had stretched his arm out farther than he could draw it back; to lose, with him meant ruin; to wait, meant anxiety and distress unutterable.

What should he do? Looking back over the events of the previous twelve months, Squire Dudley lamented his own credulity and anathematized Mr. Black. He did not regret joining the Protector, or accepting the secretaryship, or leaving Berrie Down, but he bit his nails and drummed upon the table, and then, rising, kicked his chair over, and walked up and down the room, while he called himself all the names imaginable for having accepted bills and spent money, and bought the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields.

He had been eager to buy that house the moment Mr. Black said it was in the market. He would scarcely take time to look over the premises before closing with the owner, so fearful was he of another purchaser forestalling him; but he forgot all this now, and worked himself up into the belief that the promoter had given him no rest till the deposit was paid and the deeds were signed.

He had thought himself so clever, and, behold, another hand stretched out beyond his, secured the prize. He had got nothing but a thousand a year and his shares, and he had to work for his thousand a year, do a vast amount more than "read the *Times*, and talk to people." He had to write letters, at least dictate

them, or else put down the heads which were to be written, and then see that his clerk filled them in properly, which the clerk never did sufficiently well to satisfy Arthur, who, on the whole, declared he found it easier to take the correspondence himself, than "to try to hammer the sense of what he wanted conveyed into any other person's stupid head."

He had to be at the office for a certain number of hours every day, and to see and discourse with hundreds of "perfect idiots" — shareholders — who, it is only fair to add, went away with the impression that Mr. Dudley was far too fine a gentleman to understand anything of the affairs of the Company to which he was secretary.

Further, the directors expected him to know every circumstance connected directly or indirectly with the Protector, whether that circumstance were in his department or not. Especially, there sat on the board a General Sinclair, C.B., who was the very plague and torment of Arthur Dudley's life; who was always asking for information; eternally wanting the secretary to "refer back," continually reverting to something which had occurred at the very creation of the Company, and of which the present secretary had no cognizance whatever.

A change this from Berrie Down Hollow; from doing what he liked, as he liked, without question asked by any one; a change this from coming and going as he pleased; from refraining from work; from wandering idly and purposelessly round the farm.

He detested the work, but he liked the thousand a year; he could not bear what he called the drudgery of London life, but he delighted in London gaiety, and

in that gaiety he had expected to participate without ever having to labour before he enjoyed.

This life which he was leading; this life — and one a hundred times more agreeable, Mr. Black had told him, should be his — for the mere price of Nellie advanced into the Protector, Limited; and now it was no thanks to Mr. Black he was even in London at all; Mr. Stewart had procured him this trashy appointment, which he would have spurned excepting as a stepping-stone to something much better. Everybody had made and was making, a fortune out of the Company excepting himself, and it was his money which had floated it; his money which had enabled Mr. Black to buy that place at Ealing, and furnish it without a second thought as to the cost!

But in this conclusion, Arthur Dudley — like all people who, reasoning in a passion, reason illogically — chanced to be wrong. His few thousands would have made but a very poor figure when placed to the credit of Mr. Black's recent purchases; they would have been a drop in the ocean, a blade of grass on the prairie, a single crow amongst the occupants of a rookery. Those poor thousands were many for a poor man to lose; but even had he pocketed every sixpence of the money for which Arthur was responsible, the whole amount would not have tided Mr. Black over three months' expenditure.

For in those days he was "going in for the whole thing." He meant either to rise or to fall — so he informed the Crossenhams. His companies were now all floated; some of them, indeed, in course of winding up, and out of each, and all, the promoter either had reaped, or was hoping to reap, largely. He had a

dozen irons in the fire. On the strength of his connection with the Protector, he had suddenly become a man "looked after" by those who had a "good thing" in view.

As he had looked after Allan Stewart, so minor promoters now began to look after and solicit him. He dressed as Peter Black, Esquire, had never dressed before. His light summer overcoat was a work of art to be admired by clerks and porters as a "West End cut;" his boots were articles of attire to be envied; while his hats looked as though they had been that moment taken out of silk paper, and placed jauntily on his head. He had abundant leisure now for attending to the adornment of his outward man, and he did attend to it thoroughly.

The Hoxton days, when he shaved before a piece of broken looking-glass, and performed the very slight ablutions to which he treated his person in a blue Delft washing-basin about six inches in diameter, were left at a convenient distance; and Peter Black, Esquire — quite another individual from the Mister Black who inhabited those wretched lodgings in a street leading out of Pitfield Street, Hoxton — had his house fitted up with hot and cold baths (which he used), while his dressing-table was furnished with as many oils, and scents, and pomades, as might have sufficed to dress up an old beauty for her three thousandth ball.

All of which things Arthur remembered, and was wroth accordingly. Had his money not helped to start the Protector? and had Mr. Black not promised to go shares with him? Certainly he had told him as plainly as he could speak that he should have the half of that twenty or thirty thousand pounds he expected to make

out of the Company, providing only he lent him in the first instance a hundred pounds!

Arthur Dudley had neither sense enough nor wit enough to perceive the absurdity of this climax. He was awfully stupid, and he had implicitly believed, and here was the result.

He had really thought he should, from one seed, reap immediately a whole field of wheat; he had really credited what a very clever and a very plausible man implied to be the fact, and many a reader will, I know, laugh at him for his credulity, or else scoff at me for drawing the portrait of an impossibly confiding man.

We may presume, and we do presume, of course, that ladies and gentlemen who subscribe to Mudie's would be much cleverer than all this comes to, but still there are other ladies and gentlemen who, taking in the daily papers and reading therein: "Ten pounds wanted for one week; fifteen pounds will be given for the above at the end of seven days; ample security deposited," see and believe just as Arthur Dudley heard and believed likewise. Even amongst the ladies and gentlemen who do subscribe to Mudie's, it is most probable there may have been a few who, in times gone by, deluded by plausible circulars, took shares in some of Mr. Black's companies, and, as a natural consequence, lost their money; and — since there is no one who speaks so loudly against the errors of his former religion as an apostate — doubtless the individuals to whom I refer will declare Arthur Dudley's credulity to be wicked, if not impossible.

Deferentially I stand aside, while the book is laid down, and the suitable oration delivered, then with all due respect I take up the thread of my story once

again, and speak of things which are taking place every day in the City, where fresh dupes come hourly to be fleeced, and fresh shearers, no more tender or scrupulous than Mr. Black, attend to relieve the unsuspecting sheep of their superfluous wool.

Arthur Dudley was to have had half!

Remembering this, which in the hurry and confusion of his interview with Mr. Black he had forgotten, the secretary took his hat, and walked off to the City.

Sooner than his friend had expected he accepted that gentleman's invitation, and entering the offices in Dowgate Hill, where another company — the "Universal Law Stationery" — was in course of formation, found the promoter up to his ears in business, with half a dozen people waiting to see him.

"Tell Mr. Black I will not detain him five minutes," said Arthur, quite loud enough for the whole congregation to hear, after, it may be remarked, the pleasing fashion of country people in London. "You know me, don't you?" he added, seeing the clerk hesitate, "I am the secretary of the Protector Bread Company."

Thereupon the visitors each drew his own conclusion. Some, very green indeed, thought what a great man Mr. Dudley must be, thus to force himself into the presence of the magnificent director; others, less easily impressionable, decided that a screw had got loose in the Protector, which Mr. Black was expected to set right. At all events, they each and all began working out the problem of what the secretary could want with his principal, while Arthur marched into the presence of the great man, and found him not engaged

with any individual, but simply writing his letters for post.

"What's up with you?" were his first words; "has any one come for a million of shares? or is there a fire at Stangate — or — or what the devil brings you into the City at such a time of day as this?"

"Our conversation this afternoon," Arthur answered, boldly. "I could not rest; it is not fair, Mr. Black; you have not treated me as I should have treated you. Do you remember what you said to me that day when this matter was first mooted between us?"

"Pray sit down," said Mr. Black, magnificently, waving his visitor to a seat, "and explain your meaning to me quietly, if you can. Do I remember what? we said so many things that day it would be impossible for me to recollect all, or indeed any, of them, unless recalled to my memory."

"Do you remember what you said about going half profits with me?" Arthur asked.

"I can't say that I do. Were there any profits then to share?"

"Prospective profits," the other answered. "You said you expected twenty or thirty thousand pounds out of the 'Protector,' and that whatever you got, you would go shares with me."

"Did I?" asked Mr. Black, innocently. "I wish, Dudley, you had chosen any other time in the day than this for coming to pester about bygones," he added, "for I have no end of letters to write; but, however, as you are here, say all you have got to say."

"I have nothing to say excepting what I have already said," answered Arthur, "namely, that you

promised to go shares with me in the Bread Company."

"Now, that is exactly the objection I have to doing business with a gentleman," remarked Mr. Black; "it is impossible to make him understand, excepting literally, a sentence which would be plain as a pikestaff to a boy in the London streets. Tell me the construction you took out of that speech, which, I confess, I never remember to have uttered."

"You said you would have twenty or thirty thousand out of this bakery affair, and were willing to give me half."

"Precisely! not willing to give you half of my earnings, but willing to give you a chance of winning fifteen thousand, which you would have done but for that meddling idiot, Stewart. He has dished me, too, you know. Deuce a thing I have had out of the Company except trouble, my shares, and position. It certainly has given me position. I meant we should have made — you and I together — thousands and thousands out of it, instead of which, when I had served my gentleman's turn, he bows me off with, 'The Company won't bear this, and the Company can't afford that. Whatever houses and offices we buy, must be bought on the mart. Our grain shall not be supplied through any friend of yours. I shall put in my own people to see you do not make sixpence out of that which owes its very existence to you.' Damn him," added Mr. Black, heartily; "the next time I go praying and begging for a great man's name, I'll get what I have got this time — insolence instead of thanks — the door instead of money."

There was no sham about Mr. Black's manner while he delivered himself of this sentence.

Clearly, Allan Stewart had rubbed his hair up the wrong way, and hurt the promoter grievously in the process. Arthur sat silent for a moment, surprised — wondering what he had best say next, and, while he meditated, Mr. Black opened his mouth again:

"And, on the top of all this, you come," he proceeded; "you come dissatisfied with what I have done for you — indignant that I have failed to do more. You are angry because I could not force the Company to buy that cursed place of yours in Lincoln's Inn, which, I wish to Heaven, had never been for sale, just as though Stewart did not serve me the same trick about that shop in the Poultry. I bought it on spec, pulled the old buildings down, ran up a splendid new shop as far as the first floor, and then offered it to the board. Do you think they would have it? 'Pooh, pooh!' says Mr. Stewart; 'what do we want with establishments in the Poultry? Less expensive situations will do for us;' and the confounded thing was thrown upon my hands. Had it not been for the 'London and Home Counties Bank,' which had on its board a man I knew, I should have been swamped — I tell you fairly that I should, Dudley. As it was, I sold my interest to the Company at a switching profit, which enabled me to give my friend ten per cent. on the purchase-money, and that pulled me through; and there the bank is now as prosperous a concern as any in London. Shares up to eight premium."

It might all be true. With a terrible shock it occurred to Squire Dudley that there were other people besides himself in the world — other people looking

for their halves, and percentages, and paid up shares also.

In a moment he seemed to understand that he had taken a hand at a game of chances, in which no one, not even those best experienced in the cards, could ensure success. It was a lottery in which he had embarked; and, although he might blame those who had led him up to the wheel, still he felt he could not complain when the man who had been most sanguine of success drew a blank also. He was a gentleman. Even in his blackest hour of need, Arthur, with all his faults, weaknesses, and sins, never was untrue to his training and his ancestry. He had been born — weak fool though he was — a gentleman, bred one, remained one, and he could not bandy words with this clever, plausible swindler, who, seeing his companion's hesitation, continued:

"I have not much time to spare this afternoon, for I have letters to write, and lots of people to see; but as I perceive you are dissatisfied, Dudley, I'll tell you what I'll do: transfer to you a couple of hundred of my shares in the 'Protector,' paid up. That's two thousand pounds, at the worst; and if I see I can do anything more for you, I will. Don't be in too great a hurry, old fellow. That is the worst of all you country people — you think a fortune is to be made just in a minute. I'll stand by you, if you stand by me. I swear it to you, Dudley; there's my hand upon it. Now, do not — do not, I entreat of you, go and make yourself and that dear wife of yours uncomfortable. If you have to raise a few thousands on Berrie Down, what matter? Did Berrie Down ever do anything for you that you should do anything for it?

Stick to the Protector and Allan Stewart — that's my advice; and when you are in any difficulty come to me — that is my advice also. Now, good-bye — ta-ta — God bless you, Dudley!"

And thus exit Squire Dudley without speaking a word he had intended, but with a very strong impression on his mind that Mr. Black, having been making free with the contents of a certain bottle, labelled "Martell," ordinarily concealed in the recesses of one of Tann's "Reliance" safes, must, therefore, have spoken the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

As though people did not tell worse fibs when they are drunk than when they are sober, more especially in London — as though "*In vino veritas*" were not an exploded creed with the rising generation, many of whom do not speak truth either in their cups or out of them.

CHAPTER VIII.

Great Successes.

WHILE the events I have related were influencing, more or less, the Dudley family history, the "Protector Flour and Bread Company" was succeeding to an extent which it is given to few companies in our time to equal.

If a person be sufficiently interested in the prices of miscellaneous companies' shares, to run his eye down a list of, say, a hundred and fifty of the new Limited Liabilities, he will be surprised to find how few out of the number are quoted as being at par, to say nothing of at a premium. Dis., dis., dis., is the encouraging legend attached to one after another; but it was not thus with the Protector — steadily its shares went up. It grew to be considered a good investment. The ten pound shares (two pounds paid) were eagerly sought after; and, had an intending investor gone, about that period, to any broker, and expressed his desire of purchasing into the Protector Bread Company, he would have been advised he was acting wisely — that the shares were very good property indeed.

And so every one believed. In all directions the Company's vans were to be encountered conveying bread to the far-away depôts, or else returning empty from the extremest ends of London. The bread was good; the directors — greatly to the disgust of their housekeepers and cooks, who were thus cheated out of a legitimate perquisite in the shape of commission —

ate of the staff of life kneaded at their own bakeries, and were satisfied.

If an inferior batch were produced, woe to the master baker, on whom, straight away, General Sinclair poured his vials of wrath. If the flour were sour, as servants frequently declared it to be, Mr. Bailey Crossenham's ears tingled for a week.

Never was a company better managed; never a staff more rigidly superintended.

Did Linnor, at the most easterly point of London, running short of bread, borrow a few loaves from his neighbour, Mr. Bickley, and supply them as the genuine product of the Protector, Limited, down came a note from the Secretary's office, informing Mr. Linnor, by "order of the board," that if such dereliction from the paths of duty occurred again, he, Mr. Linnor, would forthwith be dismissed from the responsible position which he held.

Neither for those brilliant creatures, dressed in orange and green, who conveyed the bread from Stangate to all parts of the metropolis, was there such a thing as liberty. Their carts were numbered, and if, on the hottest day in summer, they stopped at the "Spotted Stag," in Mile End Road, or the "White Hart," in Newington, or the "Greyhound," in Fulham, or any other favourite house of call, for a pot of beer, 16, or 48, or 33, or 27, was had up the same evening before the yard superintendent, and "cautioned" for all the world — so the men themselves said — as if the "governor was a beak."

If, after this caution, any one still preferred ale to employment, he was paid his wages and discharged on the spot.

Altogether, it was a very perfectly-managed Company, and quite a credit to its directors.

Great people, when the periodical philanthropic fit attacked their ranks, were not above driving over to Stangate, and inspecting the works; and, on the occasion of such visits, the *Times* would come out with a leader, concerning pure bread and the adulteration of food, which always sent the shares up on the Stock Exchange, and made the aristocracy feel that they had conferred vast benefits on the labouring classes.

It was nice to be associated with so excellent a Company. Good people felt that the blessing of the Almighty must rest upon an enterprise, undertaken in so Christian a spirit (there was much mention of the poor in the prospectus), and that He, who had fed the Israelites with manna in the wilderness, would likewise satisfactorily regulate the Protector's dividends; for which reason, and others too numerous and varied to mention, both great people and good people, and good and great combined in the same people, bought shares in the Company, sincerely believing that, since time began, there had never been any creature born so deserving of universal support and encouragement as Mr. Black's baby, which was now a great child able to run alone, and earn something for itself, and even repay its benefactors a portion of the money advanced to start it fairly in the world.

When the first half-yearly meeting was held, the directors not merely announced a dividend at the rate of fifteen per cent. per annum, but also stated their conviction, that the close of another half year would exhibit a much larger proportion of profit, since the expenses of conducting such a business in the first in-

stance were necessarily greater than would subsequently prove the case.

Moreover, it was resolved that no further call should be made on the shareholders, except in the event of larger mills and more extensive premises being required, when, as a natural consequence, higher dividends might confidently be expected.

The directors had pleasure in communicating the existence of a large reserve fund; and in stating that the mills of Stangate had been greatly increased in size, that the machinery was the very best known for the purposes required, that every modern improvement in the grinding of wheat and manufacture of flour was to be found on the premises, and that, as regarded the bakehouse, it was decidedly the most spacious, convenient, and best ventilated in the kingdom.

All this, and a vast amount more, being duly reported in the daily and weekly papers, shares (money at the time chancing to be cheap) went up again.

Then, the magazine-writers got hold of the Protector as a nucleus on which might be constructed a few light and entertaining papers concerning bread-making from the beginning of time, tracing the progress of the staff of life from the kneading-troughs of the Israelites down to the works of the new Company at Stangate.

There was no difficulty about inspecting the Protector's premises. A man, salaried on purpose, received ordinary visitors at the gates, and escorted them through the whole process from grinding to kneading, that is, if they came at an hour when kneading was in progress — as literary gentlemen always did.

"Wheat, from the Ear to the Breakfast Table," was the exhaustive title of one paper. Another, supposed

to be written by the same author, appeared as "Hot Rolls!" "Our Daily Bread" graced the columns of one of the religious periodicals; while, "Adulteration Considered Morally and Socially," was universally attributed by the critics to the pen of one of the most gifted and thoughtful authoresses of the day.

With all these helps, was it any wonder that the shares of the Protector should soon be at a premium? that every one connected with the Company felt himself to be to some extent a person of consequence; that Arthur Dudley forgot his fears, and only remembered his interest in the great concern; that even the mortgaging of Berrie Down grew in time to be a mere bagatelle — a trifle not worth fretting about?

What might the shares not ultimately touch! Supposing the ten pound share, paid up, came in time to be worth a hundred pounds, why, his income would be enormous; and there was nothing to prevent the shares going on rising, rising in value. If they reached fifty, would he sell? Arthur could not decide this point to his own satisfaction. If he sold, he should then have no anxiety about loss; but, on the other hand, would it be wise to sell before they reached their maximum? Then, who ever could tell when the maximum was reached?

These were the questions which perplexed the Squire, building his castles in the air, while pacing on the calm summer evenings round and round Lincoln's Inn Fields, smoking the while such cigars as never fall to the lot of any one, save secretaries and others of the same ilk, who get all sorts of good things given to them by all kinds of singular people.

Arthur, in the days of which I am now writing,

never bought a cigar by any chance. He had boxes of the best Havannas sent him, which he was now not too proud to accept.

The world had gone round since he strolled a poor man through the fields at Berrie Down. Accepting a favour did not, according to the new code, mean placing himself under an obligation. No; it rather meant conferring an obligation on the donor.

What those donors expected Arthur Dudley would be able to do for them, it is impossible even to conjecture. Arthur himself never knew; and so, with an untroubled conscience, he smoked his cigars and dreamed his dreams.

At this time, Heather was away from home — away at the seaside with her children, whom she took down to Hastings, for a month, in the hope that sea-air might do Lally more good than all Dr. Chickton's prescriptions.

Quite as tenderly as he had treated Master Charles Hope, that renowned practitioner inquired into Lally's symptoms, and devoted himself to the restoration of her health; but for all this care the child proved ungrateful.

She did not get much better. All the tonics Doctor Chickton could prescribe, and Heather with difficulty persuade her to take, failed to restore her health to make the little feet patter, patter over the floor as of old.

She could walk a short distance, certainly, without much fatigue, and drive for an hour or so at a time, but still she was not the Lally of a twelvemonth previously.

"What's the use of cramming the child with all

that physic?" Doctor Marsden inquired one day when he called in Lincoln's Inn Fields. "Chickton ordered it, did he? of course he did. When you go and pay a man a guinea, he must order you something; but now, without a guinea at all, I will give you my advice, which is none the worse for being gratuitous. Take her to the seaside; let her be out all day long; if she will bear bathing, bathe her; if that don't set her up, nothing will."

Very heartily Heather wished she could have told Doctor Marsden, that, considering his son was the cause of Lally's illness, she thought the least he could do was to proffer his advice civilly; but advice in any shape was not to be despised, and accordingly she adopted his suggestion, and bore Lally off.

At Hastings, she met not merely Mr. and Mrs. Compton Raidsford and family, but also Mr. Allan Stewart; who, after a time, took rather kindly to Lally, and became interested in her recovery.

Like all the rest of the world, he too had his favourite medical man, whom he not merely counselled Heather to consult, but to whom also he wrote a letter of introduction, in which he described her as his friend, Mrs. Dudley.

They had been the merest acquaintances in town; but intimacy is of quick growth when people meet every day, and fifty times a day, on the sands, on the Parade, in the lodgings of mutual friends, standing listening to the bands, and to the solitary murmur of the sea as it flows in on the shore.

From Mrs. Raidsford, Heather heard how admirably Agnes was managing Berrie Down.

"What a wonderful creature she must be!" con-

tinued the lady; and yet, Heather fancied there was a tone of disparagement in Mrs. Raidsford's remark, for which she was at a loss to account, until informed that "Miss Baldwin was never out of the house;" "has taken to your sisters quite as if they were her own."

This was not exactly news to Heather, for she had understood from Agnes that Miss Baldwin continued very kind indeed; but why the fact should irritate Mrs. Raidsford puzzled her, until one of the Misses Raidsford, observing, "Yes, we are entirely forgotten now — Miss Baldwin is fond of new faces," threw some light upon the subject.

That Miss Baldwin should ever have been fond of the Misses Raidsford's faces, surprised Heather not a little; but still she knew that Kemms Park had at one time patronized Moorlands, and was able to comprehend now where the sting of the Berrie Down acquaintanceship lay.

With all her heart she wished Miss Baldwin would leave the girls alone. Beyond all things she dreaded their being exposed to jealous and envious remarks. The blessed seclusion, the utter privacy in which they had hitherto lived, must, she knew, have quite unfitted them to bear unkind speeches, or ill-natured inuendoes with equanimity.

Had she acted rightly in leaving them alone at Berrie Down — alone to receive many visitors, and to bear the brunt of such gossip as that in which she perceived Mrs. Raidsford was not above indulging? The new acquaintances, whom Heather in her innocence had imagined would make the country a pleasanter residence for the girls, might only expose their conduct

to misconstruction. She had no fear of anything Agnes and Laura might say or do, but she felt afraid of what might be said of them. Lord Kemms, she knew, was now at the Park, having at length returned from Austria; and in one of her letters Agnes mentioned his having called at Berrie Down with his aunt.

Could this be another thorn in Mrs. Raidsford's side? Small as was the amount of tittle-tattle which reached Heather's ears, still she had heard some talk of an attachment between Lord Kemms and one of the young ladies at Moorlands. And, although it never entered into her mind to imagine her husband's portionless sisters could prove rivals to the great contractor's daughters, she yet gradually came to understand that Mrs. Raidsford was of a different opinion, and felt Berrie Down to be a stumbling-block in her path.

"There is some distinction come between Mr. R. and his Lordship," Mrs. Raidsford was kind enough to explain to Mrs. Dudley; "we are not on the same terms of equality with him that we used to be. I must say, I think the coolness began on our side, for Mr. R., as you, no doubt, have heard, has a perfect maniac against companies of all kinds, just as though people had not a right to make themselves into companies if they like, and it seems his Lordship told him he would have nothing to do with that 'Protective' affair of yours — no offence, Mrs. Dudley — after which he went away and becomes one of the fundamental proprietors of it. So, when his Lordship came home, Mr. R. put on his high and mighty, and would not call at the Park — as if the 'Protective' was any business of his — and so, when we meet, we only bow; and I am as satisfied as I can be of anything that his Lordship knows no more

than the babe unborn what the reason of our distance is. Indeed, he was beginning to ask me at the station, when we met him, only the train moved off before he could complete his inquiry. I think I shall write to his Lordship, and detail the matter. If Mr. R. likes to disseparate himself from old friends, that is no reason why we should — is it, Mrs. Dudley?"

In answer to which appeal, Heather said she did not know. She thought, however, she should not like to be on friendly terms with any one to whose acquaintance her husband objected.

"But, then, you are like nobody else," retorted Mrs. Raidsford.

This remark, intended to be both hurtful and depreciating, failed of its effect, because Heather mentally hoped she was not much like Mrs. Raidsford. "A woman whom Raidsford ought to have been pilloried for marrying," observed Mr. Stewart; "apparently, he is a very worthy fellow himself, but I am quite satisfied there must be some terrible want in the character of any person who could make such a creature his wife. There ought to be a law against those kind of marriages."

"Perhaps ——," began Heather, and then she stopped, colouring a little.

"Pray, complete your sentence, Mrs. Dudley," said Mr. Stewart; "you have roused my curiosity, and it is not fair to have it unsatisfied."

"I only hesitated lest what rose to my mind might sound ill-natured. I do not mean, however, any sneer when I say, that perhaps Mrs. Raidsford may have been very suitable to her husband when he married her. It is so difficult to express an opinion like that

without appearing to reflect on a man's origin," she added, getting into unutterable depths of confusion; "but I often think about a speech, a very dear girl I once knew made, concerning Mrs. Raidsford. She said, 'it was such a pity a man could not choose again when he came to years of social discretion.'"

"She used to say also," remarked Lucy Dudley, "that if Mr. Raidsford could only have foreseen how high he was to rise in the world, Mrs. Raidsford would probably now have been wife to some mechanic — cooking steaks for his one o'clock dinner, instead of being mistress of Moorlands, and having servants much more ladylike than herself under her. Bessie never was weary of mimicking Mrs. Raidsford."

"Who was this clever young lady?" asked Mr. Stewart, for whom the very bitterness of such a speech had its peculiar charm.

"A cousin of ours," Lucy answered.

"Married, or still eligible?" inquired the old bachelor.

Lucy did not reply; she looked at Heather, who, after a moment's embarrassed pause, replied, —

"She was engaged to be married, when with us, last winter; but we have not heard from her since she left Berrie Down."

"Some feminine quarrel," thought Mr. Stewart; and, looking out over the sea, he laughed softly to himself at the idea that all women were alike, — that no two women could agree; that, let them be young or old, pretty or ugly, sweet or sour, they could still jangle and dispute like the veriest viragoes.

And yet, this Mrs. Dudley puzzled him: if she had a temper, she must, he thought, have it under wonder-

ful control; if there were any evil in her, she must have an astonishing power of concealing its existence. To sisters and children, to friends and servants, she was alike, gentle and forbearing. Never but once did Mr. Stewart see her eyes darken, and her face flush under the influence of any strong emotion; and then it was a slight thing which caused the tell-tale blood to rush to brow, and cheek, and neck.

"I expect my niece, Mrs. Croft, to-morrow," he said; "I am happy to think she will be able to make your acquaintance."

Then there came that look, which was not quite pleasant, over Heather's face, — that look which set Mr. Stewart marvelling as to "what could be up" between the two women? Not an early jealousy, he decided; for Mrs. Croft was many a year older than Mrs. Dudley. What could it be? He was an especially inquisitive old gentleman, as sharp and keen concerning matters of feeling, as he was about matters of business, and so he went on, —

"You have never met her, I think?"

"Never," Heather answered; "but my husband knew Mrs. Croft very well indeed at one time, and quite recently they renewed their former acquaintance at Copt Hall."

"Copt Hall — is not that Mr. Hope's place? I recollect now, Douglas and his wife were staying there last autumn. Your husband is some relation of the Essex Hopes, is he not?"

"His mother was a Miss Hope," Heather explained; and shortly afterwards Mr. Stewart took his leave, trying to remember something he had heard about Miss Laxton having jilted a former suitor when she married

his nephew. "Was Dudley the lucky fellow's name?" he asked himself. "I'll find out all about it when madam comes."

In due time, madam came, and her husband with her; and from the hour of their arrival, Heather commenced longing to return to town. Had it not been, indeed, that Lally was decidedly gaining strength, she would forthwith have packed up and departed; but the child was better; she could run about a little, and at times there was a colour in her face which made the poor mother trust the health and the gaiety of old was about to be restored to her.

How Mrs. Croft ridiculed Heather's anxiety about the little girl; how scornfully she would listen to Lally's prattle; with what open contempt she watched the child sometimes struggling into Mr. Stewart's arms, and beheld him fondling and caressing her, were things to be seen, not described.

A stately woman, who looked born to rule a nation of slaves, and seemed to regard every one with whom she came in contact, her husband included, as so much dirt under feet; a woman who would have been beautiful but for the expression of habitual bad temper on her face; a woman who made every creature she met uncomfortable; who treated Heather with supercilious insolence, and at length told her without the slightest reserve she had instructed her child well. "She is playing her cards quite as cleverly as you," finished Mrs. Croft, in a tone of suppressed fury, one day when she saw Lally throw down her wooden spade, and run with out-stretched arms to meet Mr. Stewart. "Commend me to a meek, quiet woman when underhand

means are to be employed, and a legacy is in question."

"Do you imagine I am expecting a legacy from any one?" asked Heather.

"Of course I do," was the reply, spoken while Mrs. Croft swept along the Marina with her dress trailing about two yards on the ground behind her; "of course I do," and her dark eyes looked over Heather scornfully; "people generally expect their godfathers to leave them something, do they not? and your godfather's money is well worth finessing for. I commend your prudence; some persons might not think such conduct quite honourable, but that never seems to have occurred to you. Mr. Stewart has hitherto treated Mr. Croft as his heir. Now, however—"

"Mr. Stewart's affairs have not the slightest interest for me," interrupted Heather, hastily. "Good morning!" and, without giving her companion time to utter another word, Mrs. Dudley turned and walked back along the Parade to the point where Lally was still engaged in animated conversation with her two gentlemen friends.

"It is time for you to come in, my pet," she said, descending one of the flights of wooden steps, and making her way with difficulty over the shingle to the sands. "If you see my sister, Mr. Stewart, would you kindly ask her to bring Leonard back? I do not like him to be out in the heat of the day. I do not think it is good for children to be on the shore when the sun has so much power."

"Now, they have had a quarrel," decided Mr. Stewart; glancing along the Parade, where he descried Mrs. Aymescourt Croft wending her way homewards,

solitary and stately, haughty and defiant. "I should like immensely to know what it is all about. There is something very decidedly amiss between my amiable niece and Mrs. Dudley."

"Your wife and our pretty friend do not seem able to stable their horses comfortably together," he said to Mr. Croft, when Heather, who declined all offers both of companionship and of assistance, had borne Lally — bitterly protesting against such injustice — away. "How is it, do you think?"

"My wife is jealous," was the prompt reply.

"Does she fancy you are smitten?"

"No; but she thinks you are," Mr. Croft answered. "She considers that Mrs. Dudley stands too good a chance of being favourably remembered in your will, for much cordial feeling to exist amongst us."

"And why the devil should I leave Mrs. Dudley sixpence?" asked Mr. Stewart. "What is she to me that I should bequeath anything to her, more than to the first stranger I meet on the Marina?"

"My charming wife," replied Mr. Croft, in that daring tone of off-hand recklessness which, as Mr. Black had remarked, was one of his peculiarities, "my charming wife, giving you credit for a vein of romance, and a depth of sensibility which, I confess, I never noticed in your character, imagines that the revival of old associations, the thoughts of 'Auld Lang Syne,' in fact, which the sight of Mrs. Dudley must naturally have awakened, may produce an undesirable effect upon the ultimate disposal of your property. For my part, I am delighted at the opportunity now afforded of assuring you I would much rather you left your money to Mrs. Dudley than to my wife."

"What are you talking about, Douglas?" asked his uncle. From the drawing-room window of the house they occupied Mrs. Croft could, with the aid of an opera-glass, see, not merely that Mr. Stewart stopped as he put this question, but that he looked excited and perplexed. "What is Mrs. Dudley to me, I ask again, that I should leave her sixpence? She is a sweet woman, and pretty, and devoted to her blockhead of a husband, but I should not care if I never saw her again. Does your wife think I am in love with her? Does she imagine I am so nearly doting as all that comes to?"

Douglas Croft looked steadily in his uncle's face for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

"It really is too amusing," he said. "Do you mean to tell me you do not know who Mrs. Dudley was?"

"No; who the deuce *was* Mrs. Dudley?" inquired the other, testily.

"And she never has enlightened you?" persisted Mr. Croft.

"If she had enlightened me I should have known, I suppose, and I do not know who or what she was, excepting a simpleton to marry Dudley. As you seem so well informed, tell me this wonderful secret. Who was Mrs. Dudley?"

"Heather Bell," answered Mr. Croft.

"You do not mean that?"

"I do, upon my honour. Miss Hope told me and my wife, and explained that it was you who selected the name which seems to suit her so admirably."

Mr. Stewart did not take any direct notice of this

information; he only resumed his walk over the sands, saying to himself, —

"And so that is Heather Bell — so that is Heather Bell!"

"You understand now why my wife regards her with but small favour," continued Mr. Croft; "indeed, there is another reason why, perhaps, mutually the two ladies dislike and distrust each other. Years ago, Dudley and Miss Laxton were engaged. I knew nothing of it when I met her — when I proposed to her — when she accepted me; but the engagement was a fact, nevertheless. I am so devotedly attached to her now, that there can be no indiscretion in merely alluding to her one fault — a love of money. I am confident that she liked Dudley better than she ever liked me; but I, being the richer of the two, gained the prize. Of course, it is not in a woman's nature, at least it is not in Arabella's nature, to look kindly on the wife whom the man she jilted afterwards married. On the other hand, all the world knows Dudley does not appreciate quite so highly the blessing he has gained, as the blessing he has lost; and for that reason I fancy poor Mrs. Dudley does not feel particularly comfortable in my Arabella's society. Further, there may be a little mutual jealousy, both being above the average in appearance. Now, you have the exact state of the case, so far as I know it."

Still Mr. Stewart made no reply; he only walked on more swiftly over the sands, which were at this point wet and disagreeable, while the waves came lapping in — lapping in; and the burden of his reverie was, "So that is Heather Bell — that is Heather Bell!"

There was a story in the man's life, though no one of his kith or kin suspected it. He had loved once — once in his middle age, when the disease always leaves traces behind — passionately! and the woman he loved was Heather's mother; but the secret of his unrequited attachment had lain between the two; and now she was dead, and here was her child, and the child of the man who took the best hope of his life away, thrown across his path once more.

Heather Bell — Heather Bell, the waves seemed to murmur the name as they stole upon the sands; and the old man grew young again as the years faded away; and he saw, reflected as in a mirror, the bright glad face of the long, and long ago, when he first, at Sir Wingrave Bell's, met Lilian Gladwin, who was even in those days engaged to the baronet's cousin, William, then a poor curate in London, and afterwards the poor rector of Layford, Derbyshire.

CHAPTER IX.

"Like a Man's Hand."

WHAT a cruel world it is; what a hard, wicked, misjudging, uncharitable, mercenary world! Thus Heather Dudley reflected, while, without waiting for Lucy or Leonard, she walked homewards with Lally, the hot tears filling her eyes and coursing down her cheeks as she recalled Mrs. Croft's insulting words, as she came gradually to comprehend the full meaning of her insolent accusation.

She could not help crying; the world's cruelty and the world's wickedness were new experiences to her.

The maladies of being thought ill of, of having her most innocent notions misconstrued, of hearing intentions imputed to her which she was utterly incapable of harbouring, had not fallen to her when young, and now taken in her maturer years they seemed so severe that it was almost impossible for her to endure them patiently.

To be accused of toadying any person; that it should for a moment be supposed she could ever have mentioned the name of her family to Mr. Stewart, when, lest it might even seem as though she were thereby preferring any claim to old acquaintanceship on him, she had sedulously avoided all allusions to her former home, or any of her early recollections.

"I — I — do such a thing!" she thought; "I pay court to him for his money; I, who detest money; I, who could live on the merest pittance anywhere and

be happy; and who would rather live on a pittance than mix amongst hard, cruel, mercenary people; and to imply that I was such a wretch as to school my innocent child in deceit and affectation. Ah!" she reflected, softening a little; "it is plain she never was a mother; if she had been, she could not have imputed trickery of that kind to me;" which speech showed, not how much Heather knew of mothers, but how little she knew of the world. "It was cruel, though —" thus the mental strain ran on — "cruel to imagine such a thing; cruel to express it;" and Heather would probably have continued making these statements silently to her own heart, whilst her tears flowed as fast as her thoughts, had Lally not caused a diversion by stating:

"You walk too quick, ma; you tire me." Then Heather sat down upon one of the benches and caught Lally to her; she was ashamed that even for a moment her own anger should have made her forget the child's possible weariness. She had gone on, dragging Lally after her, and the little one was both warm and tired with the unwonted exercise.

"Are you hot, too, ma?" she asked, trying to push up her mother's veil, an attempt which Heather strove too late to resist. "Oh! you've been crying, ma; you've been vexed; was it tall wicked lady? Never mind — Lally's better — arn't you glad Lally's nearly better as well? Do not cry, pease, mamma — pease — pease."

And the poor, little, eager face puckered itself up to weep also; and the brown eyes — which had in them at times a look of Heather — filled with tears, and the thin arms twined themselves about her mother's

neck, and Lally became altogether very piteous on the subject of her mother's grief.

Looking out over the dancing sea, so bright, so sunshiny, so smooth, clasping her first-born to her heart, Heather felt that there was reason in the child's words; that, seeing Lally's health even partially restored, she had no right to weep or lament over any mere worldly grievance.

What was Mrs. Croft to her, that she should attach weight to her angry sentences, her slanderous accusations? What were they all — Mr. Stewart, and his nephew and niece? Nothing but people whom she had met for a day or two, and should perhaps meet again never more. Why should she fret over a false and libellous charge? If she were capable of such conduct as that whereof Mrs. Croft had accused her, she might then weep, but not otherwise.

She would endeavour for the future to avoid St. Leonard's. Her children should keep down by the East Parade, or amuse themselves on the Castle Hill, for the few days she purposed remaining at Hastings. No one should say she put herself or them in the way of rich people — at least, no one should say so with even a shadow of a foundation of truthfulness.

She would not do what she had in the first smart of the blow intended — pack up, and leave Hastings by the next train — but she would never subject herself to such an imputation again. She could, and she would, be out for the future when Mr. Stewart called, and she might walk at such hours and in such directions as should separate her and hers altogether from their more wealthy acquaintances.

It is quite unnecessary to add that she and Lucy

had a thoroughly comfortable and exhaustive conversation on the subject that same evening after the children were in bed; in the course of which Lucy expressed her opinion, not merely that dear Heather was quite right in her decision about Mr. Stewart, but also concerning the girls at Berrie Down.

"We should all be ever so much happier together in town," the young lady opined; "together anywhere. Could not Arthur let Berrie Down, or put in a caretaker, as Mr. Black has so often suggested? not but that it would seem terrible to leave the Hollow altogether; still, if we are not to live there, what is the use of having it lying empty?" In reply to which Heather could only answer: "There is no place in the world like Berrie Down." And then the pair had a little sympathetic cry, which did them both a considerable amount of good.

After all, they had spent a very pleasant month at Hastings; and though a cloud had towards the last darkened their sky, still who can expect fair weather to continue day after day?

Is not it the inevitable rule that storms must come, if only to clear the air; that women should shed tears in order that their eyes may be all the brighter afterwards? What right had Mrs. Dudley to look for a succession of sunshiny hours, when Douglas Croft, who was popularly supposed to be the most lucky fellow on earth, met with nothing but contrary winds and heavy rains during the short periods in the year he and his wife reluctantly spent together?

If there were any state of life in which Mrs. Douglas Croft would have been content, that state had still to be discovered; if there were anything her husband

could have done to please her, he had certainly never hit upon it.

Did he keep the windows shut, she wondered what he was made of to sit in such a suffocating room; did he fling them wide open in the morning, he knew she detested a draught, and the sight of that glitter on the sea; did he wish to ride, she thought he might have more consideration than to propose his wife mounting a hired horse; did he suggest driving, she wondered, if he were so fond of seeing the country, he had not brought down his servants and carriages, as other people did; did he offer to walk with her, she was invariably tired; did he even mention leaving the house without her, she thought, "considering he favoured her with so little of his society, he might remain indoors for half an hour in the course of the day;" did he go out in a boat, she might as well have married a London tradesman; did he finally ask her what the devil she would have him do, since he had come to the slowest place on earth to please her and not himself, she replied, that if he had not sufficiently gentlemanly, or even manly, feeling to know how to treat his wife properly, it was a pity he ever married any one higher in rank than some poor factory girl."

"I could not have married you, remember," answered Mr. Croft, "had you not first jilted Dudley;" whereupon she sighed, "Poor Arthur!" and declared "*he* never would have broken a woman's heart."

"You would very soon have broken his," retorted her husband; "though, upon my honour, Dudley is the only man I should not have pitied seeing married to you."

"Because you admire that creature with red hair,

whom he chose after me! after me by way of contrast, I suppose. Oh! she has not red hair? I confess I was under the delusion she had; but no doubt your opportunities of judging have been greater than mine. She is a very pretty woman, you say; of course you think every woman pretty, excepting your own wife. She is the kind of creature some men do admire, and she has that manner — that meek, mild, submissive, milk-and-water manner — which always makes me long to strike her and ask how she likes *that*. I do detest those amiable hypocrites. It is a pity you cannot get rid of me, and marry her."

"If I were to marry all the women I admire, I should have as many wives as Brigham Young," answered Mr. Croft: "besides, I am not quite certain that Mrs. Dudley is my style. She has too much of the angel about her; certainly, 'extremes meet'; but still, after you, that change would be almost too severe:" and so the pair were wont to wrangle on, while Mr. Stewart sat calmly reading the *Times*, or else remarked that he never so much regretted his single condition as when he witnessed his nephew's connubial felicity.

"It is all his fault," Mrs. Croft was in the habit of asserting, to which Mr. Stewart invariably made reply:

"I know that, my dear Arabella, perfectly well; no wife ever is in fault."

"Mrs. Dudley could not be, we may suppose," Mrs. Croft snapped back, on the day following her quarrel with Heather.

"If she could, she must differ greatly from the remainder of her sex," answered Mr. Stewart, who was, Mrs. Croft frequently assured those lady friends that

she honoured with her confidence, "one of the most disagreeable, cynical old bores a woman ever had to tolerate for the sake of his money."

On the whole, visits from his niece were amongst the number of those blessings with which Mr. Stewart could very readily have dispensed. He liked his nephew, and he pitied him; but Mrs. Croft was decidedly *de trop* in any house which held at the same time Allan Stewart, Esquire, of Layford.

Very frequently, people wondered why uncle and nephew kept up separate establishments, but then it was remembered that more than once Mr. Stewart had openly regretted the fact of his only near relation having married a woman whom he never could regard in the light of a daughter.

Of this fact Mrs. Croft was perfectly well aware, and she felt madly jealous accordingly, when she beheld the increasing intimacy between Heather and her godfather.

"She will supplant you to a certainty, Douglas," the amiable wife remarked.

"Well, my love, if she do, I dare say we can still, with economy, manage to exist," answered Mr. Croft. "Upon strict principles of justice, indeed, I think Dudley ought to have my uncle's money; I won you from him, you remember; now, it seems to me, he ought to have a turn. Do not fret yourself about the matter, Arabella — I take it philosophically — why cannot you do the same?"

"The same! I have no patience with such absurdity; but I think I have showed Mrs. Dudley there is one of the family, at least, clever enough to see what she is trying for."

"Do you not think it possible for a woman to be too clever, occasionally?" inquired her husband; "because it occurs to my mind you have overshot the mark by the merest trifle. My uncle did not know the touching relation in which he stood to Mrs. Dudley, until you quarrelled with her. Very possibly he would never have known, had I not, in consequence of that little flourish up the Marina, told him."

"You — told him?"

"Yes, my love; I considered it was only right he should know the great provocation you had received, so that he might not think the slight coolness between you and Mrs. Dudley originated in any fault on your side. He quite understands your feelings, and appreciates them fully."

"Douglas, you are either mad or infatuated."

"Do not moot the former idea before my uncle, or he may cut me off with a shilling, and so deprive you of all chance of ever managing his estates. For myself, I do not care for more money; I am thinking of going out to Australia, and taking a sheep-farm; of doing the Arcadian for a few years, during which time you will marry some one else, and I shall enjoy a bachelor's existence by way of variety. I am growing horribly tired of the monotony of civilised life. I wonder if I could join a mission as a muscular Christian, and go out to convert the heathen. I should like to see how a fellow with a lot of wives manages them. I should preach the same doctrines as ——"

But at this point Mrs. Croft swept out of the room, and her husband took advantage of her absence to seize his hat and leave the house, and march away in a blazing sun to Hastings, where, according to the pro-

gramme she had sketched for her own guidance, Heather was not at home.

"I am getting confoundedly tired of this," Mr. Croft remarked to his uncle next day, as they lounged together along the Marina; "suppose we swear business requires our immediate presence in town; cannot we have letters by the five o'clock post, compelling us to go up by the express to-morrow morning? Madam in town is bad enough, but madam at a watering-place, or in the country, is scarcely to be borne."

"What a choice you made, Douglas!" said his uncle, in a tone of plaintive rebuke.

"Did I choose at all? I doubt it," was the reply. "Since my marriage, I often should have liked to choose; but perhaps, had power been given me to do so, I might only have made a worse mess of it. The best of a marriage like mine is, it makes a man so philosophical. It leaves one nothing to wish for, nothing to desire; jealousy, over-affection, anxiety about the dear creature's health; sleepless nights if her finger aches; torturing doubts if another fellow is over-zealous in finding her shawls — from all these troubles I am exempt. My domestic life leaves me nothing to fret about. Like that young man in Longfellow's poem, —

"'Light-hearted and content,
I wander through the world;'

only I do not carry two locks of hair about with me and sentimentalize concerning them, so that in one respect I have an advantage over the widower."

"If your wife were in heaven, I do not think you would carry one of her curls done up in note-paper in your left-hand waistcoat pocket, after the fashion of a man I once knew," remarked Mr. Stewart a little grimly.

"Well, now, do you know I think I should," answered Mr. Croft; "when a woman is so kind as to die, it seems to me the least in common gratitude her husband can do, is to use his handkerchief freely, and publicly preserve little mementoes of her — the stalk of the last bunch of grapes she ate, for instance, her box of rouge, or the puff wherewith she powdered her face. To me there is something inexpressibly touching about relics; most probably because they are useless. I always notice people admire and reverence things which are utterly useless, that is one reason I am so fond of my wife. Oh! Arabella; oh, my beloved! there she stands at the window awaiting my return. Signalling for it, too, by all that's wonderful; shall we go and ascertain the cause of that waving cambric?" And Mr. Stewart agreeing, the pair crossed the road and entered the house, when they soon discovered the reason of Mrs. Croft's anxiety for their return in the shape of a telegram for Mr. Stewart, which had arrived about an hour previously.

"It is from Dudley," said that gentleman, placing the paper in his nephew's hand. "Nice kettle of fish, is not it? We can catch the next train, I suppose?"

"What is the matter; what has happened?" inquired Mrs. Croft.

"Nothing, except that a gentleman on our board will not be reasonable," answered Mr. Stewart. "He wants talking to, I think. Come, Douglas — that is, if you are coming with me. Good-bye, Arabella, we shall be down again to-morrow."

"Good-bye, my dear," repeated Mr. Croft. "Comfort yourself, as I do, that the parting is not for

ever;" and the pair hurried off to St. Leonard's Station, talking as they went about the telegram, which Mr. Stewart now tore up into little scraps, and scattered to the wind.

"My mind always misgave me concerning him," said Mr. Stewart. "I asked Black specially if he had authority for putting his name on the direction."

"It is an old trick of Black's, I believe, that of using names without permission," answered Mr. Croft; "you will see Frank, I suppose, and try to alter his purpose?"

"Yes, that is why I am now going to town; and I asked you to accompany me, thinking you would be glad of a holiday."

"You are very kind. I do not fancy I should have much cared for a *tête-à-tête* with madam by the sad sea waves; and Mrs. Dudley refuses to be at home to me."

"You can scarcely blame her for that," remarked his uncle.

"I am not blaming her, only I think it is carrying the theory of husband and wife being one, a little too far. However, if such be her will, I must resign myself to it."

They were standing on the platform at St. Leonard's as Mr. Croft spoke thus, and even as he spoke, the train came out of the first tunnel and stopped to take up its passengers.

"Why, good heavens, there is Mrs. Dudley," exclaimed Mr. Croft. "Can you make room for us?" he asked, eagerly opening the door of the compartment she occupied. "Are you all returning to town? I had not the slightest expectation of meeting you here."

"We always meant to return to-day," answered Heather, after she had spoken to Mr. Stewart, and the two gentlemen were seated *vis-à-vis*. "But I thought you were going to remain for some time longer?"

"So we are, unhappily, I believe," he replied, putting up the window in order to keep the smoke out of the carriage while passing through the second tunnel. "I only wish," he added, as they sped on out into the sunshine again, "we were not going to remain. I think St. Leonard's the most wearisome spot on the face of the whole earth."

"And we have enjoyed our visit so much!" said Heather.

"But then ladies have resources within themselves of which we men know nothing," he answered.

"I cannot agree with that," Heather replied; "we may have resources at home, but certainly not in lodgings; and there is one thing you can do which we cannot — smoke; Lucy and I, for instance, could not have amused ourselves for a whole evening walking up and down the Parade slowly puffing cigars, as I have seen you and Mr. Stewart doing."

"No, but you could let your dresses sweep the ground," answered Mr. Croft. "I often fancy that swish-swish of my wife's train must produce the same soothing effect upon her nerves as a cigar does on mine. Now, Miss Lally, you have not spoken one word to me for the last four days, and my heart is broken in consequence. Will you be good and talk to me now?" and Mr. Croft put out his hand to the little girl, who came tumbling over from the opposite corner to make up friends again with her old admirer, who

took her on his knee, and instituted particular inquiries into the state of her health.

"Was she better — much better — able to run half a mile without getting tired?"

"Yes," she declared, "more than 'at; 'ook at mine face; ma says it has got fat;" and she put up her little hands to her cheeks, and so drew all the flesh forward for Mr. Croft to contemplate.

"Fat, are you, little one?" broke in Mr. Stewart; "not much of that, I fear; let me look at you. She does seem considerably better," he added, addressing Mrs. Dudley. "You will take her to see Mr. Henry, though, will you not?"

Heather answered that she certainly should, whereupon Lally insisted on knowing exactly who Mr. Henry was, and being informed a doctor, declared she would rather not see him. "Other doctor gave me nasty stuff to drink, sour, and Lally did not like him."

"Very ungrateful on your part," remarked Lucy, "for Doctor Chickton was exceedingly kind to you."

"Didn't like him," repeated the child, determinedly; "said sour stuff wasn't bad to take, and it was dre'ful; said it would make Lally well, and it didn't. He told 'tories, he did."

"Are you glad you are going back to London?" inquired Mr. Stewart.

"No," said Lally, "don't like it either. I'd like to go home and see the chick-a-biddies, and Dash, and Nip and Nep, and the ponies, and Ned;" and so the child talked on, her eyes dancing with delight as she spoke of the old home any other little girl might almost have forgotten in the time, while Mr. Stewart looked thoughtfully in her face flushed with excitement,

and wondered what value his friend, Mr. Rymner Henry, might set on her chances of life.

Mr. Croft delighted greatly in Lally. He encouraged her to be what her mamma called naughty, to chatter away at express speed, to tell him all about Berrie Down, and Aggy, and Laura, "and then there used to be Bessie, you know," added the child. "Ah! Bessie was good to Lally. She singed to her, and dressed the beau-ful-lest dolls; but Lally will never see Bessie no more — no, never no more;" and the little face began to twitch, and the lips to tremble, and then the brown eyes filled with tears, and finally Lally lifted up her voice and wept.

"What is the matter?" inquired Mr. Stewart, who had been engaged in a conversation with Lucy. "What have you done, Douglas, to cause such grief?"

"I want to see Bessie," sobbed the child.

"And who is it that is so cruel as to prevent your seeing her?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"She is not with us now," explained Mrs. Dudley. "She was staying at the Hollow for some months before we left Hertfordshire, and Lally grew very fond of her. I cannot imagine why she so continually talks about her now, though; I do not fancy other children have such tenacious memories. Sometimes for weeks together she will never mention Bessie's name, and then she breaks out as you see. I wish she would not do it. It is very bad for her, fretting so much after any one. Lally, my darling, you must be patient; whenever Bessie can come to see you, she will."

"No," moaned Lally, "no more. Bessie will come to Lally back again, never no more."

There was something terribly pathetic about the child's grief even to those who knew nothing whatever of Bessie, or of the circumstances connected with her departure.

"Can't she come and see the child?" asked Mr. Stewart, a little testily. "Surely, if she be at all within reach, such a yearning as this might be gratified."

"Perhaps so," Heather answered, "if we knew where she was; but I have never heard from her since she last left Berrie Down."

"Did you part in anger then?" Mr. Stewart inquired, true to his theory concerning women's quarrels.

"In anger!" Heather repeated in astonishment, "when we all loved Bessie as though she had been one of our own household! Why she does not write to me, I cannot tell, only I know she has some good reason for her silence; and I would rather not talk about her any more, or, perhaps, like Lally, I shall begin to be foolish and cry too." An explanation necessitated by the fact that Mrs. Dudley was crying partly because of her child's grief, and partly because she never could speak of Bessie without a feeling of bitter sorrow.

After that there fell a sudden silence on the party, during the continuance of which Heather employed herself in adjusting Master Leonard's collar, which was crooked to an unimaginable extent; Mr. Stewart read the newspaper; Lucy looked at Heather; and Mr. Croft, his chin resting on Lally's head, gazed out of the window, his thoughts wandering the while miles and miles away.

"Do you expect Mr. Dudley to meet you?" asked Mr. Stewart, when the train had passed New Cross, and was speeding on through Bermondsey.

"No," Heather answered; "but his brother will be at the station."

"Oh! he has brothers."

"Two," Heather explained; and a few minutes afterwards she was introducing Alick to Mr. Stewart, who looked on him not ungraciously, while Mr. Croft stood a little apart, apparently by no means desirous of making Mr. Alexander Dudley's acquaintance.

"We are detaining you," Heather said, at length, to Mr. Stewart; who remarked, as he bade her "Good-bye," that he also was going to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and should probably arrive there first.

Then she turned and looked for Mr. Croft, who, unable longer to avoid the situation, now came forward, and assisted her into a cab.

As he did so, Alick, with a sudden amazement, recognised him.

"Who is that gentleman?" he asked Heather; while the object of this inquiry followed Mr. Stewart into a hansom, which immediately drove off.

"Mr. Croft — Mr. Douglas Aymescourt Croft. Why? Do you know him; have you ever seen him before?"

"I think I have once," Alick answered, remembering for certain he had met that same individual rather more than twelve months previously, on the Sunday afternoon when he walked across to North Kemms church with Bessie, and she left her prayer-book behind her in the pew.

CHAPTER X.

At Kemms Park.

Lord Kemms' attention "having," at length, "been called" (this was the gist of a letter his Lordship wrote to the *Times*) "to the fact of his name appearing in the list of directors of the 'Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited,' begged to state, not merely that he had given no authority for such use of his name, but that, when applied to for permission by the promoter, Mr. Peter Black, he had, in the most unequivocal terms, refused to have anything whatever to do either with the 'Protector' or any other company." His Lordship added, that "having failed to obtain a satisfactory explanation of the circumstances under which his name was placed upon the Direction, either from the secretary of the Company or Mr. Black, he trusted the Editor of the *Times* would insert his letter, and thus give him (Lord Kemms) an opportunity of setting himself right with the general public."

This letter was written after a somewhat stormy interview with Arthur Dudley and Mr. Black, and despatched to the *Times*' office hours before Mr. Stewart's arrival in town. When that gentleman, after touching *en route* at the offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields, did reach Lord Kemms' town house, he was informed his Lordship had left for Kemms Park by the 5.8 express.

On receiving this intelligence, Mr. Stewart and his nephew drove straight to King's Cross, where they

caught the 7.15 to Palinsbridge, from which place they proceeded in a fly, procured at the Plough Hotel, to Kemms Park.

Arrived there, between ten and eleven o'clock at night, Mr. Stewart bade the driver wait; and then, following the butler, who stared to see visitors at such an hour, was ushered into the drawing-room, where were seated Miss Augusta Baldwin, Lord Kemms, and Mr. Compton Raidsford.

"If I were inclined to quote Mr. Black," remarked Mr. Stewart, after exchanging greetings with his relations, "I should say, here we drop upon the conspirators. Now, Frank, what is all this about you and our Company? Nice dance you have led me over it! Why could you not have stopped in town till you had seen some of us, as any other human being would, I think, excepting yourself?"

"Mr. Raidsford had kindly promised to dine with me to-day."

"Very good of Mr. Raidsford," answered Mr. Stewart, with a look towards that gentleman, which seemed to say "I know all about it;" "and I suppose you and Mr. Raidsford have been settling our concerns for us over your claret. We stand at opposite poles," he added, addressing the contractor; "there can be no doubt but that in some previous state of existence you were bitten by a company; and have had a kind of hydrophobic horror of Limited Liability ever since. Now, Frank, tell me all your grievances; what is this about your good name being taken from you?"

"It has been used without my authority," answered his Lordship. "I told Mr. Black distinctly I would

have nothing to do with his venture, and after that he coolly went and put my name on the Direction."

"He quite understood, I think, that you had given your consent?"

"I beg your pardon: the last interview I ever had with Mr. Black, until to-day, was at Berrie Down, and I then told him nothing should induce me to lend my countenance to any undertaking of the kind."

"It was a pity Mr. Black did not take you at your word, Frank," said Mr. Douglas Croft; "we could have done without you."

"You will have to do without me now," retorted Lord Kemms. "I have written to the *Times* to say that my name was used without my authority."

"You are confoundedly touchy about your name, if Miss Baldwin will excuse my saying so," observed Mr. Stewart; which remark Miss Baldwin apparently took as a hint that the presence of ladies was undesired, for she rose and left the room, stating, with a gracious smile to Mr. Stewart, that she would not remain, and so prevent his saying whatever he liked. "*I* consider Frank has been very hasty," she added, glancing defiantly in the direction where Mr. Raidsford sat; "but I profess to know nothing of business."

"Then I wish, aunt, you would not interfere in mine," answered Lord Kemms; "and, as for my name," he went on, addressing Mr. Stewart, "how should you like yours to be put on any board of direction without your authority?"

"I should not like it at all," replied his visitor, "but still I should not think it necessary to go perfectly insane on the subject, as you appear to have done. Dudley tells me you stormed at Mr. Black

to-day like a woman; that you would not listen to a word of explanation; and that you dashed out of the office without giving either of them an opportunity of even attempting to arrange the matter with you."

"Because Black had the audacity to tell me I did give him permission, and adhered to the statement. He first insinuated I was trying to back out of the affair, and then wished to know if some pecuniary compromise could not be effected. The insolent vagabond coolly told me, "that was always the way with gentlemen, — that a merchant's word was as good as his bond, but that, unless you had everything with a swell (the expression he used) in black and white, there was no dependence to be placed upon how matters might turn out.'"

"Very foolish of Black to make such a speech," Mr. Stewart commented. "You must have put up his temper by some means, Frank."

"I made him confess he was a liar," said Lord Kemms.

"My dear fellow, how very vehement you are!" expostulated his kinsman; "you could not express your meaning more strongly if you were a costermonger!"

"I do not see why I should not employ the only word which thoroughly expresses my meaning, even though it be used by a costermonger also. Mr. Black stated that I allowed my name to be put on the Direction. I asked him when? He declared at the time we were staying at Berrie Down. I reminded him, that the last occasion on which we met in Hertfordshire was one day I called at the Hollow, when I told him, in Mr. Dudley's presence, I would have nothing

to do with the Company. Then he said, he had made a mistake — it was when he saw me at my house in London. I told him he had never seen me at my house in London — that, at the time he inquired there for me, I was in Paris. Then he declared it must have been at Palinsbridge station; at any rate, he knew I had promised to let him have my name, and that it was too absurd for me, after having seen myself advertised for twelve months, to try to repudiate connection with the 'Protector' now."

"And he was quite right there," observed Mr. Stewart.

"I regret to differ from you," here put in Mr. Raidsford; "but I cannot agree with that opinion."

Mr. Stewart looked over at the speaker with an expression which seemed to say, that it was a matter of supreme indifference to him whether Mr. Raidsford agreed or not, but still he condescended to explain that "Lord Kemms had suffered judgment to go by default."

"Mr. Black's very remark!" said Lord Kemms. "He drew his shoulders up to his ears, and stuffed his hands under the waistband of his trousers —"

"Really, Frank, you are needlessly descriptive," expostulated Mr. Stewart.

"And said," proceeded Lord Kemms, unheeding the interruption, "you know, my Lord, it is of no sort of manner of use your kicking up an infernal row about the matter now. You have suffered judgment to go by default; and whether you intended your name to be on our board or not, cannot make any difference at this time of day; so you had better let us come to some arrangement. Speaking on behalf of the other

directors, I am certain the Company will do what it can to meet your views."

"Could a man have spoken any fairer than that?" inquired Mr. Stewart.

"Fairer! I never heard anything so perfectly cool and impertinent in my life!" exclaimed Lord Kemms. "First, to use my name, and then dare to say, 'I need not try to set myself right with the public!'"

"What do you suppose the public cares about the affair?" asked Mr. Croft. "To whom, do you imagine, it signifies in the least whether your name is on the Direction or not?"

"It signifies to me," replied his Lordship.

"Why?" demanded Mr. Stewart.

"Because I do not choose to be mixed up with speculations of the kind; because I refused to be associated with your Company; because I won't be overreached in this way; because other names may have been used in the same manner, and it is time promoters were taught such liberties cannot be taken with impunity."

"Our Company is a good one — paying very good dividends, and you have risked no money in it," suggested Mr. Croft.

"Your Company may be a good one, or it may not," replied Lord Kemms; "but, good or bad, I won't be mixed up with it. I will have nothing to do with adventures or speculations of any kind."

"It is a pity you were not always so particular concerning the things you connected yourself with, Frank," remarked his cousin.

"Let by-gones be by-gones, Douglas," interposed Mr. Stewart, hastily; "because a man sees the folly

of his ways now, there is no justice in twitting him with having been less far-sighted formerly. No doubt, Frank is right as to the general principle; but this is rather a special case, with some peculiarities about it, which he will, doubtless, take into consideration. In the first place," he added, addressing Lord Kemms, "we will admit there has been some misunderstanding on the subject —"

"No," was the reply, "I will admit nothing of the kind. Black understood me perfectly —"

"Well, granting that he did understand you, what particular harm has his use of your name done? It is associated not with obscure Cockneys or swindlers, but with decently-respectable, solvent men, like Douglas and myself, for example. Of course, we know we are not lords; but still, we have a fancy we are honest, and possess some money. Our venture is turning out very well. No doubt the proper number of shares has been allotted to you. You take no responsibility — you run no risk; by making a fuss over the affair, you will do yourself no good, and may do us considerable harm. You will take time to think over the matter, and you will, when you have cooled down a little, decide to make no public scandal concerning the affair."

"I have already written to the *Times*," answered his Lordship.

"But not posted the letter, I hope. Bring it here, Frank, and we will smoke a calumet of peace over its ashes."

"Impossible! I sent it to the *Times*' office before I left London."

"If we had known that, we might have saved our-

selves this agreeable journey," said Mr. Croft; while Mr. Stewart observed:

"Well, Frank, all I can say is, I am very sorry; for now we shall have to fight you as best we can. Once in the *Times*, it is war to the death, you know."

"It was not I who sought the war," answered Lord Kemms.

"After waiting nearly twelve months, you might surely have waited another day."

"It was only yesterday I knew anything about the matter. I happened to be over at the Hollow with my aunt, and on the drawing-room table I saw one of the 'Protector' prospectuses. Glancing at it, I knew for the first time the use Black had made of my name."

"It is singular your friend, Mr. Raidsford, did not communicate the fact to you before," observed Mr. Stewart, with a slight sneer.

"There has been a coolness between me and Lord Kemms for some time past," interposed Mr. Raidsford, "originating in this very affair. Lord Kemms assured me he would have nothing to do with your Company; and when, after that assurance, I saw his name amongst the directors, I confess I felt both surprised and nettled."

"And pray, sir, if the question be not indiscreet, what interest was it of yours whether Lord Kemms became a director of our Company or not?"

"It was no personal interest of mine," answered the contractor; "but believing, as I do, such companies to be the curse of commerce—the very death of legitimate trade — when I am asked for my poor opinion, I do not hesitate about expressing it."

"You consider capital, then, which employs labour, which builds bridges, constructs railways, digs canals,

sends out vessels, the death of legitimate trade?" inquired Mr. Stewart.

"Capital, no," was the reply; "companies, yes — at least, limited liability companies."

"And yet the idea of the man who brought in, and the majority which passed, the Limited Liability Act, was, that, so far from killing trade, it would foster and encourage commerce."

"So we may conclude, or else it would never have become law," was the reply.

"Trade has always been crippled for want of capital," remarked Mr. Croft.

"And trade always will be," answered Mr. Raidsford; "it is in the nature of trade to find whatever capital it may have insufficient. In precise proportion to the extent of his business are a man's outstanding debts; consequently, the larger his business is, the greater are the number of his debtors. His capital, in fact, goes into his books; and instead of so much in the bank, he has so many hundreds of people owing him money."

"The idea of limited liability was to enable a man to put a certain sum of money into a business, and have no further responsibility," said Mr. Stewart.

"Any man could have compassed the same object by *lending* money into a business," replied Mr. Raidsford; "since the usury laws were repealed, he might have taken what percentage he pleased, and run no more risk than he does under the Limited Liability Act; but the real mischief of the present system, to my mind, is, not that large capitalists are thereby enabled to advance money to small working men, but that the large capitalists are thereby enabled to com-

bine together, and crush the small working men. Precisely as you are doing at present: you are ruining hundreds of respectable tradesmen, and when your crash comes, as come it will, those men will not be benefited thereby; they have lost their capital, small or great, as the case may be, and must content themselves with situations for the remainder of their lives."

"You are extremely kind to prophesy such a pleasant future for the Protector," said Mr. Croft.

"Where there are many masters, there are bad servants," was the reply; "at least, such is my opinion. My notion is, indeed, that in a company there is no master at all; there is no one person whose business and interest it is to see that things are properly and economically conducted."

"We have our manager," suggested Mr. Stewart.

"You have an admirably efficient manager at your works now, I do not doubt," said Mr. Raidsford.

"What do you mean by that remark?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"Simply, that I should not give Mr. Crossenham sixpence a week for managing any concern of mine; but, without question, he is perfectly competent to fill the position he occupies with you."

"Once again, Mr. Raidsford, I must ask you to explain your meaning?"

"Then, Mr. Stewart, you certainly will ask in vain," was the reply. "When, eight months since, we met in Moorgate Street, you did me the honour of asking my opinion about this Company, — and I gave you that opinion to the best of my ability, — what was your course of action? You certainly got

rid of Bayley Crossenham, but you put in his shoes a man utterly incompetent to manage even his own business, how much less yours; a man, who, though perfectly honest himself, could never detect dishonesty in others. I asked you then, if Lord Kemms' name had been really added to the Directory by his authority? and it is now evident you took no steps to ascertain the truth of the matter. I counselled you to be exceedingly wary in dealing with Mr. Black, and yet Mr. Black is now virtually master of the 'Protector,' as he is of every other company with which he is connected."

"He is not master of the 'Protector,'" answered Mr. Stewart.

"He must be master of its funds, or he never could have such an amount of money to spend, as is the case at present," was the reply.

"He is no such thing," repeated Mr. Stewart.

"I am happy to hear it, for the sake of the shareholders," answered Mr. Raidsford, coolly; "and that brings me to another phase of limited liability, viz., that this boasted union of capitalists, of which we hear so much, is, in many cases, neither more nor less than the accumulation of five and ten pounds scraped from the savings of the lower middle class; the money of people who, deluded by specious advertisements and good names, send up their post-office orders and receive their shares, and lose their cash, and thereby afford a living to a class of men who otherwise would be exercising their talents in some very different mode indeed from that of 'promoting' public companies."

"What a pity you do not go into Parliament, and

favour the nation with an exposition of your views!" said Mr. Stewart.

"I should not be the first man to advance them," was the reply. "In both Houses somewhat similar opinions have been expressed before now; of course, my views may be wrong —"

"You do not mean, Mr. Raidsford, that you have ever contemplated such a possibility?" interrupted Mr. Stewart.

"Yes, I have," was the reply; "contemplated, much more closely, the pros and cons of limited liability, than you have the Protector's chances of ultimate success. The system is rotten, Mr. Stewart, and you and such men as you, who derive profit from these ventures without incurring one halfpenny of risk, ought to be the first to confess that it is so."

"I have two thousand shares in the Protector Bread Company on my own risk, at all events," said Mr. Stewart.

"I am delighted to hear it, in one way," answered Mr. Raidsford; "delighted, because it proves you to be a thoroughly honest man; but sorry, because if anything do go wrong with the Company, your loss will be considerable."

"But I am determined nothing shall go wrong with the Company."

"In that case, doubtless you devote a considerable amount of attention to the mills!"

"Mr. Raidsford, have you any specific charge to make against our manager?"

"If I had," was the reply, "I should go before the board and prefer it. I make no charge, but I recom-

mend caution. I was right about Lord Kemms, you perceive."

"We do not admit that," broke in Douglas Croft; "we are his opponents now, and must fight the matter out with him."

"Or, rather, Mr. Black must," added Mr. Stewart. "He got us into this scrape, and he must get us out of it; so, remember, Frank, you are in for a paper war with one of the shrewdest men I know; you and Mr. Raidsford will have to muster your forces so as to come out of the struggle with *éclat*. I am sorry it has so happened, I must confess; sorry that Lord Kemms has been — I am obliged to use a harsh word, Mr. Raidsford — so ill-advised. With the best intentions, I feel confident, you have counselled him to hurry into print (a course always to be avoided, if possible), but still, you have led him wrong. Had you left the matter in my hands, Frank," he added, "I should myself have stated publicly that there had been some misunderstanding, and so withdrawn your name, without any fuss or anger. As it is — why it is — and there is no use in further discussion. We must now do the best we can for ourselves," and Mr. Stewart rose to depart.

"You are not thinking of going to-night?" exclaimed Lord Kemms, in astonishment; "because we differ in opinion, we are not, I trust, to swear eternal enmity."

"Not with my good-will," replied Mr. Stewart; "but because we have differed in opinion, I must get back to town by the first train to-morrow morning. Had your letter to the *Times* not been despatched I would gladly have remained here, instead of returning

to Palinsbridge to-night; but needs must, you know; and you, Frank, are our driver."

"I am sorry for it, extremely sorry!" exclaimed Lord Kemms.

"Sorry for having appealed to the god of English breakfast-tables?" asked Mr. Stewart. "Come, I am glad to see some signs of repentance about you."

"I did not mean that; I am not sorry for having written and despatched my letter, I only regret that there should be any necessity for you to drive back to Palinsbridge to-night. But, at least, you will have something to eat before you start?"

"It appears to me we ought not to break bread under your roof," said his cousin; "but, considering we have had nothing since we left Hastings, ten hours since, except a glass of sherry and seltzer water at Palinsbridge, I think it would be carrying animosity farther than human nature could endure, to refuse your obliging though tardy offer."

"For my part, I shall be very glad to accept it," declared Mr. Stewart; "worry always gives me an appetite; and I should not care to be dependent on the good offices of mine landlord at the Plough, for supper. His seltzer water was as hot as though drawn from one of the Geyser springs. And will you let some of your people tell the fellow who brought us over, to give that poor devil of a horse of his a feed? Nice creature it is; trots about three miles an hour!"

"Will you allow my man to drive you back, Mr. Stewart?" said the contractor. "I shall be very happy if you will make use of my carriage."

"Thank you, no," was the reply; "the fly must return, and so Douglas and I may as well go in it.

We are not exactly like man and wife, apt to quarrel by the way. If he were my better half, I would accept your offer at once; as it is, we will return as we came — much obliged, nevertheless."

Then Mr. Raidsford thought he must return home.

"Good-night," said Mr. Stewart; "though your views differ from mine, I do not say but there is much truth in them. That is the worst of our imperfect state of existence, there is truth in everything."

"Even in a promoter," suggested Douglas Croft; and then the three shook hands with Mr. Raidsford, who drove back to Moorlands thinking to himself —

"These great people are very curious individuals. If three men in my own rank of life had come together under such circumstances, there would have been hard words used, and a quarrel to a certainty. Is it that they are not in earnest, or is it civilization? One hears a great deal about civilization; is this one of its fruits?" and thus pondering, Mr. Raidsford returned home to the wife of his bosom, who, back from Hastings, was conducting her household on principles which seemed to the servants the reverse either of Christian or civilized.

Perhaps this fact made the amicable warfare at Kemms Park seem all the more astonishing to the contractor, who had many things still to learn, though he was so clever about business and business matters.

"If that be the way gentlemen quarrel," he thought, "I cannot wonder at their looking down on us; I wonder now what they are thinking about me?"

Had a little bird of the air carried what the trio were saying about him to Mr. Raidsford, he need not have covered his face and shut his eyes.

"Spite of his crotchets I really like Raidsford," remarked Mr. Croft. "What do you suppose he meant, uncle, when he spoke about the Company failing?"

"He meant," answered Mr. Stewart, "what I have often suspected myself, — that Black is too great a rogue to be honest, even if honesty be to his interest. Raidsford is a well-intentioned fellow, but he has not much information outside his business. Still, his ideas are worth consideration, and I shall consider them, and look up Mr. Crossenham," added Mr. Stewart in a lower tone, as he went downstairs to the dining-room, where a substantial supper was already spread.

CHAPTER XI.

The Paper War.

The eight o'clock up express only stopped once between Palinsbridge and Holloway; but on the occasion of that one pause, Mr. Stewart procured a copy of the morning's *Times*, where, occupying a prominent position, he found Lord Kemms' letter.

"It is a mercy Frank is a Lord," remarked Mr. Croft, drily; "for I do not think he would ever have got through the world in a subordinate capacity. The longer I live, the more satisfied I feel Providence orders these things a vast deal better than we could do."

"You think, I suppose, Providence made him a Lord on the same principle as it makes so many poor men inventors. If an individual have not five pounds in the world, he has a patent — the compensating balance — is that what you mean, Douglas?"

"Something of that kind," answered his nephew. "I have often wondered how Frank would have pushed his way had he been turned adrift at ten years of age with half-a-crown in his pocket; one cannot marvel at men like Raidsford being a little elated at the contemplation of their own exploits, when one thinks of how few people there really are in the world with any brains at all. Now, unprincipled though he may be, can you help admiring Black? I confess, I have the very highest opinion possible of that honest individual's talent."

"Much the same sort of talent as pickpockets and burglars are made of," answered Mr. Stewart.

"Oh! you are wrong there," was the reply; "decidedly wrong; Black's is an administrative genius, mental — not physical. The pickpocket's cleverness is merely highly-cultivated manual dexterity, the same kind of thing that makes some women clever at fancy work, at crochet, and netting, and those fearful groups of flowers executed in Berlin wool, which my Arabella's soul delights in. A burglar, again, is merely an advanced mechanic, but Black's genius is of a very different order. He has ability to conceive and impudence to execute; he has an immense faculty of organization; he would have made a good Chancellor of the Exchequer, I fancy; his resources are inexhaustible; his power of construction enormous. No undertaking is too large for him to fear carrying through. He puts me often in mind of those fellows at the Circus, who can ride four horses at once. He could manage fifty companies. I often think, when I am talking to Black, about what judges sometimes say to criminals, namely, that it is a pity to see such talents applied to such purposes; in another walk of life, Black's genius ought to have carried him to eminence."

"Don't waste your regrets upon such an arrant humbug," Mr. Stewart replied. "Nature has fitted him into the only hole he could by possibility have filled. Black's genius is a lying genius. Had it been clothed by circumstances decently, externally apparelled with honesty, and virtue, and truth, it would soon have got rid of those incumbrances, and come forth in its primitive nakedness. I tell you Black has no talent, save for dishonesty; if that devil were cast out of him,

he would be strong no longer. As Samson's strength lay in his hair, so Black's lies in his falsehood, his cunning, his impudence, and his plausibility. Take these things from him and he would be but as other ordinary men; honest, perhaps, but weak; able to earn a living, but certainly not to make a fortune. It is quite a mistake to imagine because a man is clever in one walk, he could be clever if he pleased in another. The walk is dictated by his particular cleverness, and Black's talent, as I said before, is lying."

"Yet he professes to be weary of planning, and scheming, and uncertainty —"

"And very possibly that profession is true. A man may be weary of the devil which possesses him, even though he be unable to get rid of it. At one time, I confess, I thought Black was going to turn over a new leaf, and content himself with the fine things the Protector had in store for him, but now I fear the old Adam is too strong in Black ever to give him a chance of turning from the evil of his former ways, and I am satisfied if he can ruin our Company he will do it somehow. This business of Kemms' is bad too. How many shares have you, Douglas, besides your qualification?"

"Five hundred," was the reply; "and I shall give my broker instructions to sell them."

"You do not mean that?"

"Indeed I do; I have no intention of losing sixpence, if I can help it. I have never lost money by a company yet, and I do not purpose beginning now."

"But it is so confoundedly mean to desert a failing cause."

"I never made any pretension to Quixotism. The

moment Frank said he had written to the *Times*, I made up my mind to sell; and, if you were wise, you would sell also."

"No; I shall not adopt that course," said Mr. Stewart; but he did not tell his nephew what course be intended to adopt.

"It will be a bad business for Dudley, if anything should go wrong with the Protector," remarked Mr. Croft, after an uncomfortable pause. "He has mortgaged Berrie Down."

"Surely not!" exclaimed Mr. Stewart.

"Surely yes," was the reply. "Old Craddock has advanced five thousand pounds upon it at four and a half — good interest too, I call that, on security good as the Bank of England."

"I wish I had heard of it."

"So do I," was the reply; "but my lawyer knew nothing about the matter till it was all settled."

"What did he want the money for; do you know?"

"Bills, I understand; and that the sum I have mentioned will not meet the one-half of those he has out. 'Pon my honour, I am very sorry for Dudley. He will be a beggar before he is ten years older."

"He is an awful fool," observed Mr. Stewart.

"So he may be; but folly is not a sin, is it?"

"It is sin's half-brother, or whole father, or something of the kind, at any rate," retorted Mr. Stewart; "but here is King's Cross, and now for Mr. Black," and so saying the old man sprang as lightly from the compartment as his much younger companion; and, bustling out of the station, hailed a cab, which speedily conveyed the pair to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

"Where Mr. Black had already been," Arthur in-

formed them. "He is gone on to Dowgate Hill, where, he told me, any message would find him until one o'clock. Shall I send and ask him to come up?"

"No," Mr. Stewart decided; "we will follow him."

"I saw Lord Kemms' letter in this morning's *Times*," Arthur remarked.

"Yes; his Lordship ought to have a straight waistcoat, and bread-and-water diet for a week, to teach him not to be so hasty," answered Mr. Stewart. "Black must answer him."

"He said, he hoped you would leave him to do so," Arthur replied. "He does not seem to attach much importance to the matter."

"Does he not? I wish I could think it of no consequence," replied Mr. Stewart. "Now, Douglas, are you ready?" and he again bustled out, and seated himself in the hansom which had waited for them.

"Mr. Croft!" it was Arthur, who, following the younger man out, spoke now in a lowered tone of voice, "do you think this will affect the Company?"

"There is no telling," the other answered; "only, if you have many shares, take my advice and get rid of them — quietly, you know, quietly."

"What was Dudley saying to you?" Mr. Stewart inquired as they drove off in the direction of the City.

"Asking me how this would affect the Protector, and I advised him to sell his shares."

"He has not a share beyond those Black gave him. A couple of hundred, paid-up."

"Then, what has he done with all the money for which Berrie Down is mortgaged and to be mortgaged?"

"God knows! given it to Black, most probably."

"Then he is virtually a ruined man."

"Time will show," answered Mr. Stewart, philosophically. "I do not think he will get much back from Black, at all events."

"Those are the kind of men, then, Raidsford had in his mind, when he was speaking about companies last night."

"Likely enough; but there were idiots in the world before Limited Liability was thought of, and there will be idiots in the world when Limited Liability is no more."

"Still, it does seem hard."

"That if a man will rush into the flame he should be burnt. Do you propose, Douglas, constituting yourself a species of knight-errant to rescue distressed gentlemen from the consequences of their folly? You could never prevent a man like Dudley getting into trouble. By right, he was Black's natural prey, natural and legitimate. You do not quarrel with a cat for catching a mouse; why should you bemoan Dudley losing his money to Black?"

"I pity his wife."

"Ah! there I go with you; but she followed her fancy in marrying him, and she must pay for the indulgence of her fancy sooner or later. The best thing which could happen for her ultimate happiness would be for her husband to get a thorough sickening of following his own courses. I consider him one of the most conceited prigs I ever met. He won't take a hint from me on any subject."

"On what sort of subject?" inquired Mr. Croft, a little curiously.

"Why, you know he might learn a little of business, fit himself for some more lucrative post, but the moment I mentioned my idea he was up like a rocket. 'He did not intend to retain the secretaryship an hour longer than he could advantageously dispose of his shares. If I imagined he was going to remain at the beck and call of every one who liked to call and beckon, I never was more mistaken in my life.' Whereupon," added Mr. Stewart, "I, of course, humbly apologised; and remarked that I had certainly been under the delusion he wished to add to his income, but I was happy to find I had been mistaken; because, from my own limited experience of the expenses of living in London, I felt satisfied he could not long afford to live at the rate he was doing on a thousand a year."

"Was not that a little ——"

"Impertinent, you would say," finished Mr. Stewart, as his nephew paused; "that is precisely what I remarked to you a few moments since — knight-errantry in the nineteenth century is always impertinent; but still, if one sees a man walking straight on to the brink of a precipice, involuntarily one shouts out a warning to him. That is what I did — and that is what I got for my pains. Now, Mr. Dudley may go to the devil, for any trouble I shall take to prevent his travelling that easy road."

"But his wife, and the children?"

"One of the children will happily never need a marriage portion," returned Mr. Stewart, "and the other is a boy. As for Mrs. Dudley, we have talked that over before; and, speaking of her, Douglas, may I inquire the reason of the special interest you seem to feel about her? A charming lady, doubtless, but still,

a recent acquaintance. You are not in love with her, I hope?"

"No," Douglas Croft answered, "I do not love her."

"What is the link, then? for a link of some kind there must be."

"Perhaps that my wife dislikes her," suggested Mr. Croft; then he added, in a different tone: "I have been a stupid ass and an awful sinner — that is the reason I like Mrs. Dudley."

"Complimentary to Mrs. Dudley."

"True, nevertheless," answered Mr. Croft; and at this moment they arrived at Mr. Black's offices in Dowgate Hill, where they found that gentleman thoroughly enjoying himself.

"So you are really going to leave his Lordship in my hands for execution?" he said, when Mr. Stewart had explained the purpose of their visit. "I am delighted to hear it, for I was just sketching out a letter in answer to his. May I read it to you?"

"No," answered Mr. Stewart, "I do not wish to be mixed up with it in any way. The matter rests between you and Lord Kemms, and we must decline all interference. Fight it out yourselves. Whether the letter ought to be answered at all, until after the next board-day, is a question for you to decide."

"I will take that responsibility on my own shoulders," remarked Mr. Black. "Of course, all this is Mr. Raidsford's doing, not Lord Kemms'. I only wish it was Raidsford I had to answer, I would give him a dose that ought to cure him of meddling for a while again."

"Could you not publish the formula?" asked Mr. Croft; "it might be useful to the general public."

"There are some medicines the success of which depends as much on the person who administers them as on the drugs they actually contain," laughed Mr. Black; "and I don't think my physic would do Mr. Raidsford much good, unless I gave it to him with my own hands. Meddling humbug! what the deuce does he know about companies?"

"I suppose it is true concerning things as well as people — that we generally dislike that which we do not know," said Mr. Stewart.

"And a vast number of both things and people that we do," added Mr. Black. Shortly after which speech his visitors took their departure, leaving him to finish his letter at his leisure.

Next day it appeared in the *Times*, and ran to the following effect: —

"Sir, — In the *Times* of to-day I see (unlike his Lordship, I read the papers) that Lord Kemms, wishing, for some inscrutable reason, to 'set himself straight with the general public,' repudiates all connection with the Protector Bread and Flour Company (Limited). How such repudiation is to effect the difficult task Lord Kemms has set himself, he, perhaps, can explain; but as his letter is calculated to injure our credit, I beg leave to state, first —

"That Lord Kemms distinctly gave me permission to place his name on our Direction.

"Secondly. That the terms on which his name was to appear were fully settled between us.

"Thirdly. That the list of directors was published in almost every respectable paper throughout the kingdom, and daily for some weeks in the *Times;* and that,

consequently, Lord Kemms must have been perfectly well aware his name was placed on the Direction.

"Fourthly. That Lord Kemms gave no opportunity, either to myself or our secretary, Mr. Dudley, of entering into the slightest explanation on the subject. He called at the offices of the Company, in Lincoln's Inn Fields, but only for the purpose, apparently, of indulging in a monologue, since, when Mr. Dudley and I endeavoured to utter a few words concerning the question in dispute, he indignantly rushed out of the secretary's room, declaring he should write to the *Times*. Under the unfortunate impression that the matter can have the slightest interest for the general public, he has carried out his threat, and I am therefore compelled to request the insertion of this letter.

"I have not the remotest idea of the source of Lord Kemms' irritation, and can only say, that nothing could be farther from the intention of any person connected with the Company than to give his Lordship the least cause of offence.

"Your obedient Servant,

"Sept., 18— "PETER BLACK."

Next day but one appeared another letter from Lord Kemms, stating that every "fact" contained in Mr. Black's letter was untrue — that he had never given permission for his name to be published — that he had never known it was so published , until some time after his return from the Continent, when he happened to meet with a prospectus of the "Protector Bread and Flour Company (Limited)," and then for the first time became aware of the use which had been made of his name. He considered that in the interests

of the general public, he was bound openly to state the nature of the fraud which had been practised. He pointed confidently for authentication of his statement, if authentication were necessary, to the fact of his never having been registered even as a shareholder; and he declared he had given both Mr. Dudley and Mr. Black ample opportunity of explaining the line of conduct which had been pursued.

This epistle immediately elicited two in reply: one from Arthur Dudley, to the effect that Lord Kemms was mistaken in imagining he had afforded an opportunity either for discussion or explanation. "Not," added Arthur, "that it would have been in my power to give his Lordship any information on the subject, as I am in utter ignorance of the facts of the case; but, had this been otherwise, I should still have failed to obtain a hearing."

Mr. Black followed suit by remarking, that a nobleman who could consider seeing a prospectus "having his attention called," might reasonably be supposed ignorant of the true meaning of words, and through the whole of his letter gave his Lordship the benefit of this doubt. Mr. Black stated that though shares had been duly allotted, whilst Lord Kemms was abroad, registration of course was difficult; that his name, failing the legal qualifications, had remained on the Direction as a matter of courtesy, since, having failed to take any steps to constitute himself a director, by attendance or otherwise, the business of the Company had been conducted without his presence or concurrence, to which circumstance, Mr. Black adroitly more than hinted, Lord Kemms's ill-humour was attributable.

To these letters Lord Kemms replied in a singu-

larly confused epistle, which branched off from the question really at issue, to vague statements concerning companies in general, and limited liability in particular. Mr. Raidsford being a much cleverer contractor than author, really did his Lordship an immense deal of mischief over these letters, and, although the editor of the *Times* kindly spared the owner of Kemms Park nearly a column of small type, and stated at the foot, "we can insert no more letters on this subject," thus leaving the ball with his Lordship, still that general public, with which Lord Kemms had been so eagerly anxious to set himself right, was greatly divided in opinion, and vexed in spirit as to who was to blame — whether Lord Kemms, or Mr. Black, or both, or neither.

To settle the matter, there ensued a most voluminous correspondence between the pair — a correspondence which, unrestricted by any fear of the *Times*' editor, swelled out to sheet after sheet of letter-paper closely written.

A few copies of that correspondence, printed at the time for general circulation, and freely advertised in the *Times*, are still extant, and may be perused by the curious in such matters, when down for a month at the seashore, or recovering from serious illness, or at any other peculiarly leisure period.

The pamphlet was to be had gratis at the Company's offices, Lincoln's Inn Fields; it was forwarded free by post to all parts of England; it was made the subject of newspaper comment and private criticism, until, in absolute despair, Lord Kemms cursed the Protector, and Mr. Black, and all his own kindred, and, under the shades of his ancestral trees, vowed a vow

that the next time he rushed into print he might be pilloried, and pelted with eggs, and bespattered with mud and dirt, as had been the case latterly.

But he stuck to his point; and, although right is not always might, in the hands even of a nobleman, still Lord Kemms may have been pronounced the victor, insomuch as he contrived to do the Protector a vast deal of injury; to shake the Company to its very foundation; to create an enormous amount of alarm amongst the shareholders; and to cause the directors much perplexity and annoyance.

After all, a company is very like a woman; once blown upon, its credit is worth but little from that time forth for ever. It may demean itself with the extremest propriety; under circumstances of temptation it may remain honest and fair dealing, it may struggle for a livelihood, and earn one in the properest manner possible; and yet, when all these things are placed to the credit side of the account, they shall not outweigh the damning fact that a shadow once fell over it; that it was "talked about;" that there were diversities of opinion as to its conduct; that there were doubts expressed as to its perfect and immaculate purity.

Thus, at any rate, affairs turned out with the Protector. By a curious feminine logic, ladies discovered that the quality of the Company's bread was affected by the newspaper correspondence.

Heaven knows! perhaps the fair creatures were weary of waging an unprofitable war with their servants — those real chiefs of London households; perhaps the entreaties — very humble and servile — of Markby, round the corner, carried due weight with the so-called mistresses of town mansions and suburban

villas; perhaps the "cash down" principles of the Company were too strict to suit the laxer views of people who had been accustomed to the greater freedom of a "six months' run;" perhaps — but why go on multiplying suppositions, when the actual result is all which need be stated? — customers fell off in abundance; week after week a smaller quantity of bread required to be baked, a more limited supply of flour was demanded; till at length the directors began to look gloomily in each other's faces, and inquire "what business was coming to." The shares also decreased in value, and by the time another half year came round, things had begun to look, as Mr. Black declared, "very blue."

As for Arthur Dudley, he had reluctantly renewed those bills, for which Mr. Black was, he considered, responsible, once again, and paid off the others out of the money raised on Berrie Down.

He did not, so he conceived, owe a sixpence in the world, and he had the property in Lincoln's Inn, his furniture and his salary, but still things were "looking blue" with him also. When he came to cast up his year's expenditure, he discovered a thousand pounds would nothing like see him through it.

He was an honest man, as I have said before, but he had gone on spending — spending — without a thought of how all this spending was to be provided for, until the gradual depreciation of the Protector's shares roused him from his dream of security, and compelled him to look his position in the face.

Then he realised to himself for the first time, how much easier it is to be economical in the country than in London; how much less chance there is of a person

living beyond his income amidst green fields than amongst bricks and mortar. At Berrie Down, he could have accounted for every sixpence; in town, all he could clearly determine was that the money had gone — where it was gone he might have defied a conjuror accurately to tell.

Cabs here; expenses there; a luncheon with so-and-so, a dinner with some one else; a picnic at Bushey; Heather's visit to Hastings; fees to Dr. Chickton. It was but a guinea now, and ten pounds again, and half a sovereign on such a date; and yet, these items mounted up.

There are only ten hundred single pounds in a thousand a year, and a five-pound note Arthur knew had often not covered his daily expenditure.

If he dare have told Heather then — if he only dare have left that miserable office of his, where he kept poring over bills and cursing impatient creditors — it would have been a comfort to the man; but there had arisen a coolness between him and Heather of late. She was either jealous or exacting — perhaps both; she objected, not by words, which he might have combated, but by manner to his excessive intimacy with Mrs. Croft.

And it was so perfectly ridiculous! jealousy in the matter was so utterly uncalled for! There was nothing wrong in his friendship for Mrs. Croft — nothing; therefore ill-humour, even dissatisfaction, was quite unreasonable.

If he had given his wife cause for anger, Arthur could have understood her antagonism — but without cause? Just as though a flirtation were not fifty times harder to endure patiently than a *liaison;* as though the

external caution which the latter demands were not preferable to the flaunting boldness of that virtue which fearlessly laughs aloud while looking down into the very pit of Vice.

Sin does not, as a rule, voluntarily walk on the same pavement with injured wives, staring them out of countenance; sin does not come to a woman's house, dressed out in the extreme of the fashion, trailing its silks and satins over carpets which are trodden by the feet of sorrowful and neglected women.

There is something to be urged against sin! Injured husbands and wives have decidedly the best of the argument when once the seventh commandment is broken and strange idols occupy the shrines which once were consecrated to the household deities; but against flirtation conjugal jealousy is powerless: it can suspect all things, and confirm none; it has no cause to bring openly, even into the domestic court; it suffers and yet has no disease; it feels the smart, yet can lay its hand on no open wound.

Flirtation is like a shadow: it follows you about, and still no man can lay a hand upon it; it may dog your footsteps and disturb your peace, and yet, if complaint be made of it, you are assured it is only a fancy which is distressing you.

It is the person who complains in this case who is in fault, not the person who offends; it is the exacting wife or jealous husband, not the foolish man, or forgetful woman, who is to blame if domestic unhappiness accrue from an over-appreciation of Mr. This, or Mrs. That.

What folly to strive to keep a husband eternally at home! What absurdity to suppose a wife is never to

speak civilly to a male acquaintance! so the defence runs, while it is not thought necessary even to keep the cause of offence discreetly in the background. The whole affair is so moral, so strictly proper, that it is never supposed possible dear John can grow weary of seeing Alonzo, nor Mary become tired of hearing Imogen's praises sounded.

There is no sin — of course not — and therefore, no harm being done, every one ought to be satisfied; only when flirting Virtue becomes, as it does in such cases, brazen-faced, the question arises whether Sin, with averted head and downcast eyes, be not the easier vanquished opponent of the two.

At all events, without for a moment insinuating that Mrs. Douglas Croft was other than the most discreet of British matrons, it is open to doubt whether the most indiscreet of women could have given Heather Dudley one-half so many heart-aches as did that amiable and estimable wife.

Had Mrs. Dudley been wise and philosophic, she would doubtless have reflected that Arthur, never having been a peculiarly agreeable addition to the family circle was quite as well out of it; but then, Heather, being neither wise nor philosophic, fretted herself over her husband's defection till she almost lost her beauty. A great mistake!

She had loved this poor, weak husband, borne with him through the years, lightened his troubles, been obedient to his slightest wish, and this was the result; — that he deserted her whenever the woman who had jilted him held up her finger to beckon him back; that he forgot all his wife's faith, and truth, and tenderness, and remembered only he had once been attached to this

handsome virago, whose preference flattered his vanity; who felt pleased to have this old admirer following in her train.

Well! Heather had long known she did not possess her husband's heart; and if this were a fact, what could it matter to whom he gave it?

Thus she strove to reason herself into contentment; but a woman is not the most reasonable creature in existence where her affections are interested, and accordingly, perhaps, she was as Arthur decided, a little wayward and exacting; a wife burdened at that time with many anxieties, amongst which, perhaps, the worst was — Lally.

For as the leaves fell, Lally had drooped, and now, when Christmas was at hand once again, the child drooped more and more.

There could be no question about the matter, Lally was very ill indeed; far more seriously ill than when twelve months previously Bessie had "kissed her to pieces" under the misletoe, and hung up holly branches over her bed.

CHAPTER XII.

For Evermore.

After her return from Hastings, Heather lost no time in taking Lally and Mr. Stewart's letter to Mr. Rymner Henry.

That great man did not pay quite such devoted attention to his new patient as Doctor Chickton had considered necessary; on the contrary, Mrs. Dudley thought him a little negligent. He asked few questions; he did not "take much notice" of the child; he was a little stand-off and ceremonious; he was at no pains to win Lally's heart. He expressed no opinion on the case, and declined to say how long he thought it might be before she was well.

The proximate cause of her delicacy did not appear to interest him as it had done Dr. Chickton. As a narrative, Heather's story might have its merits, so his manner seemed to imply; but, in so far as it afforded the slightest assistance to his comprehension of the disease, she might have spared herself the trouble of repeating it.

He wrote a prescription, against his will, Heather imagined, and then he rose, signifying thereby that the interview was terminated.

"What do you think of her?" Mrs. Dudley ventured to inquire, as she laid the fee wrapped up like the curl of which Mr. Stewart had spoken, in a piece of note-paper on the table, guiltily, and as if she had committed a sin, "what do you think of her?"

"I should like to look at her again," said Mr. Henry. "No, you need not bring her here; I will call some day when I am in your neighbourhood. Have you seen Mr. Stewart lately?"

"Last week," Heather answered.

"Was he quite well? Ah! glad to hear that; wonderful man; astonishing energy; wonderful — wonderful!" and, amidst these exclamations, Mr. Henry cleverly manœuvred his visitors to the door of his consulting-room, where he consigned them to the care of an individual who, although he demeaned himself like an archbishop, and looked like a master undertaker, was yet kind enough to see Mrs. Dudley into her cab, and tell the driver to return to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Before Heather expected him to do so, Mr. Rymner Henry called. In her drawing-room, he seemed a very different individual to the Mr. Henry who had been so stiff and so stand-off in his own domains.

He talked a good deal to Mrs. Dudley, and some amenities were exchanged between him and Lally, who preferred a petition on her own account against any more medicine, "for I am well now," she assured him, "better as well."

"What does she mean by that expression?" inquired Mr. Henry.

"Better than well, I imagine," Heather explained. "I do not know where she heard the phrase, but she adopted it during her first severe illness, and has since continued to use it."

"And you think you are too well to require medicine?" he added, addressing the child.

"Iss." Lally's speaking was still, as Mrs. Ormson declared, in a deplorably backward condition.

"But if you do not take the medicine I order, you may get ill again."

Lally turned this view of the question over in her mind, and then remarked, "it would be time enough to have the medicine when she did get ill again."

"Your mamma does not think so."

"But then ma has not to take it."

"Your mamma would not object to taking anything I ordered, if she thought that would cure her little girl," — at which remark Heather held out her arms to Lally, and the mother and child went through one of those pantomimes which supply the place of all assurance, as they elude all description.

Inexpressibly touching, too, become such pantomimes when the spectator knows the time during which they can be repeated is but short; when he is quite well aware that the days are drawing near on which the child so loved, so idolized, must be laid in the arms of a colder and grimmer nurse to be caressed and hushed to sleep, and pressed close to her mother's breast, never more, ah! never.

And of this fact Mr. Henry was only too confident. The moment he looked in Lally's face, he knew for a certainty that which Mr. Stewart had vaguely comprehended. The temporary improvement Heather talked of so thankfully, could not deceive his experience. He understood the nature of such varieties too well to be deceived by them; he knew Lally was doomed, and the bright sunny November day, spite of all its delusive light and glitter, could not blind him to the fact that winter was close at hand.

For which reason he wished Mr. Stewart had not sent Mrs. Dudley to him. He was not a man to delude

with false hopes such as Dr. Chickton had held out, and yet to tell this fond, foolish mother that it was a mere question of time and cure, was beyond his ability.

To refuse to treat the hopeless case, to decline ordering vain remedies, would have been almost barbarous, when the poor creature apparently believed the very strength and might of her own love could save her darling from the grasp of a foe too terrible to mention.

"It will dawn upon her by degrees," the surgeon thought, "there is no need for me to tell her;" and so, after a few minutes' more conversation, he departed, utterly ignoring the fee which Heather would have pressed upon him. He would not see, or feel, or take it; and when at length he could not avoid noticing the shy, puzzled look in her face, he said, —

"I do not come professionally, you know; I shall only call when I am in your neighbourhood, and have a quarter of an hour to spare. Good-morning!" and he was off, leaving Heather much surprised, and perhaps, also, a little vexed.

For it occurred to her Mr. Stewart must have arranged to pay Mr. Henry for his services. After her experience of Dr. Chickton, and his guinea a week, she never imagined any one would take the trouble of attending even Lally gratuitously.

The child might be, as Dr. Chickton had remarked, one of the most interesting little creatures he ever beheld; but even supposing Mr. Henry to be of the same opinion (and Heather with all her maternal vanity and affection could not persuade herself the surgeon was anything of the kind), still that opinion need not pre-

vent his taking a fee, since it had not produced a similarly deterrent effect on Dr. Chickton.

Altogether, Mrs. Dudley thought she would write to Mr. Stewart on the subject; and, while expressing her obligations for his intended kindness, assure him he was depriving her of a pleasure in not suffering her to pay for anything which might hasten Lally's recovery.

She told him, truthfully enough, God knows, she would rather save and economize in every possible way, than that Lally should want for the best help money could procure. She said, what also she believed to be a literal fact, that her husband was perfectly well able to afford Mr. Henry's fees; and she entreated him to allow her to send him whatever sum he had placed in his friend's hands for attending Lally.

And then, almost against her will, but still of necessity, because it was not in her nature to be abrupt or ungracious, she added some words of gratitude for all his kindness to her little girl, and "remained his sincerely, — H. Dudley."

She would not sign herself "Heather," lest the name should attract his attention, and Mr. Stewart noticed the omission. He knew enough of women to be aware that, when possessed of a pretty or uncommon name, they always write it in full, and he liked Mrs. Dudley too much to believe for a moment she was superior to the little foibles and weaknesses of her sex.

"She is a good girl," he thought, as he replaced her note in its envelope; "I wish she had married any other man than Dudley;" after which mental remark he wrote her a few lines, saying she was quite mis-

taken in her idea, "that he had not mentioned the question of money in any way to Mr. Henry, and explained that, very possibly, if fees were forced upon his acceptance, the surgeon might feel a delicacy in seeing Lally so frequently as the child's state of health required. Mr. Stewart added, he trusted he should on his return to town (the letter was dated from Careyby Castle) hear a good account of his little friend."

But, long before Mr. Stewart's return to London, the temporary improvement in Lally gave place to increased weariness, to weakness worse than pain, to peevish complainings of "being tired, ma, tired;" and then, in despair, Heather looked upon Mr. Henry's now frequent visits as matters of course, and began to watch his face and ponder his words anxiously and fearfully.

She did not know exactly what she dreaded; she could not bear to put it to her own soul that Lally was in danger — that Lally was incurable.

She would sit and think, poor weak heart, of those bright sunshiny days at Hastings, when the progress of her child's disease had stood still, when it even seemed to retrograde and allowed her to play on the sands, and pick up shells among the shingle, and run screaming with delight over the grass; and while she thought, she would persuade herself that change was all Lally needed, that health resided wholly out of town, and sickness solely amongst the wilderness of houses, the labyrinth of streets. That brief reprieve made the subsequent relapse seem all the harder to endure patiently; it was like the hope of a fortune held out to a beggar and then withdrawn, only to plunge him into a deeper and blacker poverty than before.

Against her own fears, Heather fought madly; she could not endure that any one should say Lally looked ill, that Lally grew thinner; she could not bear that Lally herself should complain of weariness. Her love made her at times seem almost harsh; her passionate struggle with the dread which would not now be refused entrance, made her fiercely deny the existence of danger. That which had at one time only caused her anxiety, now rendered her nearly frantic. She grew irritable and impatient. The sweet repose of old, gave place to a constant desire to be up and doing. Could Mr. Henry give Lally no different medicine? should he advise taking her away? Mr. Dudley's aunt was wintering in the south of France, might it not be better to try a total change of climate? She would go with her, if Mr. Henry thought a different air would restore her strength; but Mr. Henry declined to recommend travelling at such a season. He said the child was better at home; better in that warm town-house, with every comfort around her, than she could possibly be elsewhere. And thus things went on, till at length Lally had to be carried up and downstairs, and lay most of the day on a sofa, drawn close beside one of the drawing-room windows, from which she could look out over the Square.

Even then Heather would not despair; she thought when once the spring came, Lally was certain to get better; she was always saying, that the moment mild weather arrived she must take her child to the sea-side, and the pair never wearied of planning the journey, of picturing the waves rippling in upon the shore, of gathering, in imagination, shells and pebbles and weed; of fancying how pleasant it would be to see the sun

shining upon the waters, as they used to do — as they used — ah! Heaven.

Once again Lally took up her former cry of "Will it be spring soon, mamma? Will it be spring before very long?" And she would repeat the same inquiry to Mr. Henry, with the addition of — "And when the spring comes, shall I be well?"

The first time she put this question, Heather looked swiftly and sharply towards the surgeon, but she could read nothing from his face.

"Well," he repeated, "are you not well now?"

"No;" and the poor little head was shaken in confirmation of this hopeless negative.

"Tell me where you feel ill," he said; but Lally was incapable of this descriptive flight.

"Has she pain?" he asked; and Mrs. Dudley answered, "Very rarely."

She would have liked Mr. Henry to pursue the subject and investigate it more thoroughly, but instead of doing so, the surgeon only took up one of Lally's hands, and looked at it absently.

He knew, and had always known, that the malady which was on the child, his skill, great though it might be, could never cure. He knew the disease she had in her, call it by what other technical name his profession might, was, in plain English, Death; and the man who shall discover a cure for that complaint has yet to be born.

He knew her body would grow more feeble, her limbs more easily tired, her poor pinched little face more pinched as the days went by.

He knew, that in the whole of the pharmacopœia, there was not a drug which might give her even a

chance of life. He knew this, he had always known it; and yet he could not bring himself to tell Heather the naked truth. He saw the woman's heart was bound up in her child; he guessed, perhaps, that her husband was not likely to be much stay or comfort to her when the hour of trial came; and yet, at length, he decided to speak to Arthur, to tell him his little girl was dangerously ill — ill past all hope of recovery.

Which, of course, when communicated to him, Arthur did not believe. He sent for further advice — for lying prophets, who spoke of healing when there was no chance of healing; and softly descended the staircase, whispering peace in a house where there could be no peace.

And yet, what need was there for them to be cruelly conscientious — unmercifully truthful? If their words broke the force of the descending blow, kept it suspended in Heather's sight, without absolutely crushing her heart, who may say that their subterfuges were wrong — their suggestions useless?

The evil days when no telling should be required, were drawing very nigh; and there was no one, save Arthur, who remained quite blind to their approach.

He had always preferred to ignore facts, if there were any treacherous, illusive, pleasant hope that his feeble nature could clutch. He was not one likely to believe there was any actual danger to be apprehended, so long as he could pay the veriest quack to come and tell him the child's life might be saved. He hearkened to Mrs. Croft, when she assured him all mothers were alike — so easily frightened, so over-anxious, so wearisomely careful about their petted darlings. Scoffingly, almost, she would declare, that but for these "women's fancies" doctors never could earn a living; and she in-

sinuated that, so long as fees were to be had, it was not likely they would pronounce Lally convalescent.

Possibly, she did not herself believe the child's life was in absolute danger; but she did know, not merely that Lally was very ill, but that, by keeping Arthur so much from home, she was infusing another drop of bitterness into Heather's cup.

Had Mrs. Dudley remonstrated on the subject, which she felt far too weary and broken-spirited to attempt, there can be little question but that Mrs. Croft would have retorted, she, at all events, had no right to complain, "considering my husband is continually in Lincoln's Inn Fields," which was true, though, certainly, Heather could not be accused of encouraging his visits.

Five times out of six she was "not at home," and yet he haunted the house. He never seemed tired of bringing little luxuries for Lally. The fruit he procured moistened the parched lips; the flowers he sent lay on her pillow; the oldest wine in his cellars, the choicest grapes from his uncle's forcing-houses at Layford, found their way to the sick room, which Lally now never left.

He was fond of children, this man who was childless, and Lally had twined herself into his affections. He would have done anything to save her, and he importuned Mr. Henry about Lally till that great man became perfectly sick of the sight of his old friend's nephew.

Well, it was down a lane bordered by roses she went to her long home; soft hands tended her; a loving breast pillowed her; friends bore her company sorrowfully while she glided — glided adown that road, the

descent in which is, towards the last, so steep and sudden.

Even Heather was deceived concerning the end, which drew nearer day by day, and hour by hour.

It was so gradual, no one could say when the change came — no one could tell exactly when Hope finally left the house, closing the door behind her. No one could remember when the child ceased to make lamentations concerning her own sickness, and grew patient; no one could quite recollect when it was every person about the house, save Arthur, commenced to realise that Lally — the little Lally of a happier time — might never roam again with tireless feet from parlour to dairy, from garden to paddock, of that old home which they seemed to have left so long and long ago.

There was very bitter sorrow in that London house; to their business Alick and Cuthbert went daily with hearts which were heavy with grief for the little plaything about to be taken from them for ever; the girls up from Hertfordshire could not settle to their usual occupations, but wandered idly and purposelessly about the house; the servants crept to their work, feeling the burden of a great trouble oppressing them. Mrs. Piggott could neither rest nor eat, and Priscilla Dobbin's eyes were constantly so red that Harry Marsden's remark concerning them was no longer applicable. Ned took a dreary holiday to come and have a look at "Missie," but had to beat a hasty retreat downstairs, where he sat in the kitchen and cried like a child; but still death was slow about coming; and still Heather kept her weary vigils, and still Arthur would not comprehend.

One evening, utterly exhausted, she had thrown

herself on the sofa, leaving Agnes to keep watch beside Lally, when the man who acted as messenger to the company and footman to the Dudleys, entered the room, where no candles were lighted, and nothing dispelled the gloom except the fire burning not over brightly, to inform Heather —

"A young person wished to speak to her."

"I cannot see any one," Mrs. Dudley replied.

"I told her you could not, ma'am," the man replied. He was a very magnificent individual, who impressed shareholders wonderfully, and certainly considered himself a much more important personage than the secretary; yet, notwithstanding his superiority over every one else connected with the "Protector," he had always been graciously affable towards Mrs. Dudley, and now, in her trouble, he felt very sorry for her indeed. He had children of his own, so he informed Mrs. Piggott, and "knew what it was;" whereupon he had taken upon himself to assure the stranger Mrs. Dudley could not possibly be disturbed, and that he should decline delivering any message whatever to her.

But the "young person" had been importunate — she had resolutely refused to take "no" for an answer — and she so persistently insisted on a note she produced being given to Mrs. Dudley, that Tifford at length wavered.

"If you give her that note," the stranger asserted, "she will see me; and if you do not give it to her, she will be sorry hereafter to know it was kept from her. I will wait outside till she has read it." And so saying, she coolly stepped out into the night through the open hall-door, whereat she had found Mr. Tifford

meditating, in the midst of a silence which seemed, no doubt, to him, as great as that Harvey found amongst the tombs.

Frequently, Mr. Tifford declared Lincoln's Inn Fields was as lively as a churchyard; and, at the precise moment the young woman came up and accosted him, he was thinking he might as well be buried alive as shut up there.

"You can close the door," she remarked, noticing his hesitation; whereupon Mr. Tifford at once invited her to "step inside" and sit down, while he went upstairs to his mistress.

The stranger stepped inside as permitted, but did not sit down; she stood on the mat, with her shawl wrapped tightly around her and her thick veil tied close under her chin, until Tifford returning bade her follow him upstairs.

He ushered her into the dim drawing-room, and then shut the door.

By the hearth stood Mrs. Dudley.

"You bring me news," she said, "of ——" But before she could finish her sentence the stranger advanced out of the gloom, and flinging herself on Heather's neck, broke out into a passion of weeping. It was the wanderer come home at last! — it was Bessie, so long mourned, so long looked for, restored at an hour when her advent was least expected.

To Heather it seemed almost as though one had been given back to her from the grave, and for a moment she drew out of it a vague augury of recovery for Lally.

"Bessie! Bessie!" she exclaimed, clasping the girl to her heart; "Bessie — dear Bessie!" And then there

were kisses, and sobs, and low-murmured exclamations; they could not ask questions, they were so moved — they could not talk, for very excess of thronging words — they could not speak, because they had so much to say.

At length they stepped back a pace or two, so that each might look in her friend's face.

They had been parted little more than a year, and yet how changed were both!

"You have suffered, Heather," Bessie said; and then she took the dear face between her hands and turned it so that the firelight might fall upon it.

"Yes — Lally," the other answered, and her tears began to flow once more.

"It was hearing about her brought me to you. I must see her, Heather, though she has forgotten me, of course."

"If she have, it must be very recently," was the reply. "How did you hear of her illness?"

"From Ned," Bessie answered. "I did not know anything about your having left the Hollow, and went there, hoping to be able to see and speak to you alone, but I found the place deserted — oh, it did not seem like Berrie Down any longer! — and then Ned told me Lally was very ill. So, as I could not rest without looking in my child's face — she was almost mine, Heather ——"

With a sob, Bessie broke off. The past came back to her as she spoke — the past, with its sunshine, its purity, its peace. She thought of the evening Heather returned from London — the evening when this poor story opened — when she and the child sat upon the grass dividing their bonbons, and a glory lay over the

landscape — a glory wrought out of the beams of the setting sun which sank to rest as she and Heather walked slowly towards the House, talking of Gilbert Harcourt and her own future. Counted by time, that evening did not lie so very far back in the past — but computed by events, it seemed to Bessie as though half a lifetime had come and gone since then.

It was like looking back to childhood from the confines of middle age; it was like recalling one's youth when tottering feebly to the grave. It was so far away, and yet so near. It was as though for years and years she had been climbing to the summit of some steep hill, till suddenly she reached a point where she was able to pause and glance behind, and from whence she could see close to her, and yet separated by all that lapse of time, by all the toil and labour of the ascent, the happy valley she had left. There, steeped in the sunshine of old, were spread out before her the plains of her earthly heaven. Once again she felt the breath of the sweet west wind upon her cheek; she beheld the westeria with its wealth of leaves; she saw the windows of those pleasant rooms wreathed with roses, festooned with honeysuckles. There was a great peace in the air, and the woman whose face had the sad forecasting expression walked beside her over the sward.

There had been a little jealousy between them then; but that was gone and past — passed like winter's frosts, melted like December's snow.

And this was how they met once more, with the child dear to both of them so ill, that, had Bessie returned but a few hours later, she might never have looked upon her living again.

Quietly they passed upstairs together; with silent

feet they entered the room where Lally lay, with Agnes still keeping watch beside her.

Heather, as they drew near the bed, put her finger to her lips, as a warning for Agnes to utter no exclamation of surprise.

"I do not want any one to know I am here," Bessie whispered in her ear; "but I could not rest without seeing her. How is she now?"

"Very quiet," Agnes answered.

Very quiet. Yes, too quiet, Bessie thought, as she bent over the child, for the great change to be far distant. Very quiet. Oh, woe! that the little busy feet should ever have grown so idle — that the restless body should ever have become so still!

Very quiet — too quiet, for Bessie had to stoop down to hear if she still breathed. Quiet with the skin drawn tight over her face; with her hair, damp and thin, pushed back from her forehead; with her poor hands, which were now but skin and bone, lying listlessly out upon the coverlet; with her eyes closed and the fringed lashes sweeping her cheek; with her mouth parted a little, Lally was indeed at last very quiet — quiet enough to have contented any one who had ever thought her too full of health, and mirth, and spirits.

Silently Agnes gave place to Bessie. She took her shawl away, and removed her bonnet, and carried them to a distant sofa. With a glance Bessie thanked her, and then she turned to the child again — her child — whom she had loved, petted, scolded, kissed, and teazed in the bright summer weather, and loved, and nursed, and tended, and left when the holly berries were shining above the little bed — her child of whom

she had been so fond — her child who had been so fond of her, who had made such moan for Bessie, and yet who had now too nearly done with this world's loves and pleasures to be told her old playmate was returned and standing close beside her.

There was a great silence in the room. Upon the threshold stood the universal Conqueror, and already the child felt the chilling influence of his presence. With her hand clasped in Bessie's the mother sat watching; with her head resting on the pillow Bessie looked at Lally, never removing her eyes from the child's face.

On the other side of the bed stood Agnes, leaning against the wall, weary and faint; but there was no sound of weeping in the apartment; they would not sob, they would not make lamentation to vex or disturb the spirit hovering on the dark shores of Eternity's mighty ocean.

They hushed their grief, and they bowed their heads in silent prayer, and the rustle of the angel's wings — the angel who was come to fetch their darling — might almost have been heard through the stillness which abode in the room.

All at once Bessie rose, and passing round the bed, asked Agnes in a whisper, —

"Where is Arthur?"

"At Mr. Crofts'," was the reply.

"Send for him," said Bessie, and Agnes left the room.

After a while the rest of the family came in one by one — Alick and Cuthbert, Lucy and Laura, and the servants, Mrs. Piggott, and Prissy, and Jane; but when the silence was thus broken, the child grew

restless, and then Heather motioned them to go — all save Agnes, and Bessie, who, crouched up in a dark corner, escaped observation. Time passed by, and still there came no tidings of Arthur. Once again Bessie spoke to Agnes, and again Agnes went softly downstairs; when she returned, she whispered that Alick was gone to fetch his brother.

With her anxious eyes Heather followed every movement of the pair, and at length she asked Bessie — "Is it so near?"

A silent pressure of her hand was Bessie's only answer.

"Would you send some one for Mr. Henry?" the poor mother whispered.

"My darling, what good can he do?" Bessie inquired; but Cuthbert was despatched for him, nevertheless.

Before many minutes more, however, had elapsed, the child began to move from side to side, and talk wanderingly. She moaned gently, and tried to raise herself in bed. Agnes put her arm behind the pillow, and lifted her a little. Involuntarily Heather and Bessie stood up, as though they heard and felt something approaching, and the former murmured in the very extremity of her anguish, "My child — my child!"

"Don't, Heather — don't?" Bessie said, in an agony of entreaty.

At sound of her voice, Lally opened her eyes wide and looked on the speaker with an expression of recognition.

Almost immediately her moaning ceased, her restlessness subsided; there came a glimmer into her face

of remembrance, and a smile — a very ghost of the old whimsical smile — played about her lips as she stretched out her little arms and said, —

"Bessie carry me down among the blackberries, and cover me with leaves?"

Oh Lord! in the days when that was their pastime, who would have dreamed of so pitiful an ending to the short story!

For a moment, for her — for the child — no doubt the chamber was flooded with golden sunbeams — without question she saw the landscape lying still and tranquil in the clear, calm, bright light of those summer evenings which had been so happy and so glad.

She beheld the trees gently waving their branches in the soft breeze; she heard the light stirring of the wind amongst the foliage; she saw the lawn sloping away to the Hollow, the sheep dotting the fields beyond; she was in her home — her own very home — as she had often called it; the past was present with her once again, and Bessie stood beside her on the smooth green turf.

The mortal sickness was gone; the months of feeble health were wiped out; the limbs felt tireless as of old; pain was to her an unknown experience, weakness a thing she had never felt; she was lithe, and active, and strong; restless and insatiable for movement, as ever; the game they had played at so often was to be played once more; adown the slope they were to go, swift, and happy, and free; adown the slope, over the grass, under the trees, into the Hollow, among the blackberry bushes, and then ——

Bessie lifted the child, and laying her in her mother's arms, said, "Take her, Heather."

That was all — a moment after in this world there was no Lally, she had passed to the Eternal Shore.

Ah me! ah me! who in the days not so very long departed would ever have thought that the little comedy of Lally's life should come to hold within it so bitter a tragedy for Heather; who would ever have fancied that the fair freckled face should wear so worn and wasted a look, that the little hands should be crossed and lie so motionless upon her breast, that the eyes should never sparkle with glee nor fill with tears again, that the sound of her laugh should never be heard more?

No more, no more! it all came to Heather's mind as she laid her first-born on the bed — dead. No more, no more! and then the torrent of her grief, like a tide which has for a brief period been kept back by a feeble barrier, broke bounds and swept everything before it in a resistless flood.

No more, no more! never to part the laurels again and peep forth from amongst the green leaves gleefully, never to stand amidst the flowers, with her little frock held up to receive the buds Bessie showered into it, never to sit with Muff in her lap, never to kneel on the sward hugging Nep's great head, never to be in and out, out and in, never to go to the sea-side as they had pictured, and gather shell, and weed, and pebble, never to see the spring come round again, and the primroses dot the copse. No more — no more!

Never more either to grow older and to change, never to be a grown-up daughter, never to be taught anything, never to alter, never to be either sorrow or comfort, curse or blessing in the future, never to have

a bitter memory attached to her; always to be "little Lally," always to be a child.

In the future there came consolation to the mother from this thought, but that future was far off in the hour when she knelt beside the bed weeping as though her very heart would break.

Somehow they got her out of the room, and Agnes stayed with Heather while Bessie dressed "her child" for the last time, and left her, a smile still hovering on her lips, to sleep the soundest sleep even Lally had ever known.

Stealing softly down the stairs Bessie met Arthur. She had her bonnet on and veil down, so as she stood aside on one of the landings to let him pass, he did so without recognising her.

The man was white as his dead child, and trembling like a leaf.

He had come too late! there was no Lally now in the silent room; there would be no Lally in any room which his feet might enter for evermore.

CHAPTER XIII.

In Berrie Down Lane.

It was all over! Skill could do nothing more for her. Love itself was impotent now.

They brought flowers, and strewed them on her; but their bright colours, their sweet perfume, could delight the child no longer. They passed into the room where she lay a score times a day; but Lally never said, "Who's 'at?" or weakly put out her hand to welcome one of them.

Bessie might steal in at night to look once again, and still once more, at the child she had loved so much; but Lally needed no one to sing her to sleep now — she had ceased wearying for her old playmate, and tears for her loss could trickle down her little white face no more.

Even Arthur, who stealthily and like a criminal watched his opportunity of visiting the chamber at times when no one should witness his grief — even he, with all his sorrow and contrition, could not win a word from Lally, whom he had so persistently, until the very end, indeed, declared to be in no danger.

Not from any evil intention, but merely because his vanity and his weakness were great, he had suffered himself to be led away by the still beautiful woman who had been the love of his youth. He had neglected Heather in days which he now understood must have been very dark to her; he had seen little of his child, who lay before him with her formerly eager face cold

and fixed, with her limbs still, with her hands at rest, with the bright flowers already fading on her breast, very quiet — oh! so perfectly still.

What was Heather's grief to his — her passionate woman's sorrow to his? She had sat with the child, nursed her, heard every word the lips now so mute had uttered, supplied every want the body, which now needed nothing, had fretfully desired. Her grief might be very terrible, very hard to bear, but there was no remorse mingled with it. Her tears might flow unceasingly, but there was no bitterness in them. She could talk of her lost one, and receive sympathy from every person around; but Arthur — he had rarely seen Lally — he had been glad to forget her illness — he had listened to false words of comfort, and now, when his eyes were opened, it was only to look on — death.

An awful repentance had seized him when Alick, having at length succeeded in tracing his brother to one of the theatres, whither he was gone with Mr. and Mrs. Croft to see a new piece which at the time chanced to be creating a sensation, brought him out of the building with one sentence —

"If you want to see Lally alive, come home immediately!"

How he ever reached Lincoln's Inn Fields, Arthur did not know. He had some faint remembrance of walking down steps, and entering a cab, and driving — it might have been for miles, or only for a hundred yards, so far as his recollection of the matter enlightened him.

The blow Tifford dealt him at the door blotted every antecedent event out of his memory.

"Too late, sir," said that individual, in a low tone to Alick. "It is all over!"

"What is over?" Tifford subsequently informed his friends, Mr. Dudley demanded, adding, "And then, poor gentleman, I told him she was gone."

Arthur was precisely the man to feel a shock of this kind keenly; a stronger nature could never have suffered itself to be so deluded; and the servants about the house, the only people who noted his visit to the close shut room, suspected that Mrs. Dudley's grief was less bitter than his; that her open lamentations, her fast-flowing tears were preferable to this silent sorrow — to this tardy repentance which kept him haunting the death-chamber — dragging him continually away both from business and from rest to look on the face of the child he had only grown to love much when she needed no more love from any human being.

It has before been stated, that Arthur Dudley always rated more highly the blessings he lacked than the blessings he enjoyed, and this very peculiarity of his temperament increased the grief which his affection, and his repentance alike were sure to produce when once affection and repentance were useless.

Never before in his life had Arthur Dudley felt so lonely and so miserable as during the week which succeeded Lally's death. For some time previously he had been gradually estranging himself from every member of his family, and now there was a restraint evident in their manner towards him — a restraint and an awkwardness which neither he nor they, knew exactly how to overcome.

In those days even Heather grew hard, and would not of her own free will speak to him as she did to

others about their child, whom he had, as she fancied, neglected.

"She was mine," the poor mother repeated, when Bessie would fain have had her talk to Arthur of Lally, "she was mine, and mine only; he never cared for her. Even strangers — even Mr. Croft and Mr. Stewart, and Mr. Henry — were kinder to my darling than her own father. No, Bessie, I am not unfeeling — it is the truth. He was never with me nor with her; always with that wicked, cruel woman — always — always."

It is a curious anomaly to notice how harsh the very excess of a woman's sensibility frequently renders her.

She feels one side of a question so deeply, that there is no room left in her nature for considering even the possibility of there being another side at all. And, in that hour of mortal sorrow, Heather had no leisure to bestow a thought on any one except her dead child. Even her love for Arthur seemed blotted out in indignation at his neglect of their first-born.

And yet the iron had entered very deep into the man's soul — so deep, that the day when he followed Lally to her last resting-place was perhaps the bitterest of his life.

They buried her at Fifield. Not so very far from the old home — under the shadow of the grey church-tower — they laid Heather's darling down to sleep.

"Lilian, aged six years and four months" — that was the legend her little coffin bore. "Lilian!" No fear of offending the unities now, she was gone where names do not convey much meaning.

"Six years and four months!" She was gone, also, where age and time are not of much account either.

Poor Lally — nay, happy Lally — to have had a life at once so bright and so short, so brimful of everything which can be packed by possibility into the longest span of human existence.

Sunshine and mirth, and love and friendship, and care and devotion.

What — though "finis" was written to the earthly story after a few short chapters — say, friends, was the story less round and perfect in its symmetry for that?

Was the ending in Fifield churchyard all sorrow? Nay, rather there came a time when Heather was able to think, almost with thankfulness, of that child face which should never grow old, nor changed, nor wrinkled, nor careworn, nor other than innocent and pure, waiting for her in that far-off land, where the "ransomed of the Lord shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

All who had been so kind to her in her first illness, came to see the last they could of "poor little Lally Dudley," together with those who had grown fond of the child towards the end.

Alick was glad there were so many round the grave, for he felt that the presence of strangers would exercise a beneficial influence on his brother, who had been in such grief all the way down — in such sore distress for the loss of the little one he should never in this world see again.

Returning on such an errand to the old place — which he had left with high hopes of success, with almost the certainty, as he thought, of conquering for-

tune — would have been inexpressibly bitter to Arthur, even without the reflection that his child had died far from him — farther away than though oceans and continents, mountains and rivers, had divided them; and it needed all his strength to carry him through the ordeal bravely, and with good courage.

Mr. Croft was present; but from him, Alick Dudley kept aloof. Even amongst the moss-grown headstones in Fifield graveyard, he could not forget what he had seen amidst the tombs at North Kemms.

He would not break faith with Bessie; but he could not be cordial to the man, although he had been kind to Heather and fond of Lally.

Alick was able, perhaps, now to guess the reason of his fancy for the child; but that did not soften him much towards the offender.

Rather the reverse, possibly; young people are, like most women, apt to be a trifle intolerant. They are very ignorant, and they are very virtuous; their standard of right is happily high, their idea of sin is, fortunately, that it is black as night. There are two colours only for them in this world; of the delicate shades of grey into which, as the years go by, every human feeling seems ultimately to resolve itself, they have no understanding. It is entire innocence, or entire vice — it is either devil or angel. What is the good of a man being a man, if he cannot resist temptation? where is the boasted purity of a woman, if she have ever even looked on sin?

Very nice sentiments, doubtless, and appropriate to the season and state of life in which they are generally expressed and believed. Too much toleration in the young would prove as dangerous as too many open

windows in the spring; to the fleshly mansions, doubtful winds of doctrine would thus be permitted ingress. It is better for young people to continue, as their charming fashion is, delightfully bigoted, than to learn charity from practical knowledge of those temptations which make older persons question whether it be not possible for virtue to drag her spotless robes through the mire, and for vice to go through such an explanatory purification as might almost make a blackamoor clean.

And it was perfectly natural, considering his age, his character, his education, and the circumstances of the case so far as he knew them, that Alick Dudley should take the worst view possible of Mr. Croft's conduct.

Had he not deliberately, and of malice aforethought, come like a wolf in the night, and stolen Bessie away — he with a wife living, too?

Well might Bessie not write to Heather (Alick was not aware that Bessie had returned to the one friend, of whose love and faithfulness she felt confident); well might the guilty creature hold herself aloof from all communication with relative or acquaintance. That Bessie had been deceived, Alick never imagined; that Mr. Croft had not jumped into sin at a single leap, was an idea he would have scouted. How easy, how gradual, how pleasant are the slopes leading down into the valley where Vice holds her court, this young Joshua had no conception. He thought that every offender, every one who went so far wrong as he felt confident Mr. Croft had strayed, ought to be stoned like Achan, so that he might trouble the peace of Israel no more.

Comfortable thoughts these, to fill the mind when standing beside an open grave; but they were Alick Dudley's thoughts, nevertheless, and they made him hold himself aloof as far as possible from the man who had, he believed, first stolen Bessie away, and then striven to be kind to Lally, as a sort of offset against the shame he had brought amongst them.

He was contemptible altogether, the lad decided, too mean for him even to despise, and yet Alick would have liked to fight this despicable individual — to put some terrible affront on him — to do him a serious bodily injury — to tell him, that although Bessie was not worth fretting after, still the man who had lured her away was worth punishing.

Nothing Mr. Croft could say or do, Alick kept declaring to himself, should ever induce him to grasp his hand in friendship; and when all was over, when the body of the child who had never known of her own experience the meaning of the word "loneliness," was left to lie solitary under the shadow of that grey church-tower till the day of judgment, Alick acted upon this decision, and drawing back from the little group which clustered around Arthur, found himself walking side by side with Lord Kemms.

Heaven knows what put such a thought into the young man's mind at the moment; but, after they had passed through the gates, Alick suddenly asked his companion:

"How is Nellie?"

"Stone blind, as you said she would be," was the reply.

"And I have not yet made the fortune out of which I was to repay you," remarked Alick.

"I am sorry to hear it, though not for the reason you mention," Lord Kemms answered. "It would have been better, however, perhaps, for all of you had I never bought her. The money she fetched was the first your brother advanced into the Protector."

"Poor Arthur!" murmured the Squire's brother; "but it was not the Protector that brought us back to Fifield to-day."

"True," rejoined his companion; "but, perhaps, your brother's child might have lived a little longer had she never left Berrie Down."

"You are wrong there, my Lord," Alick replied; "nothing could have saved her; she was dying when she left here, and it was owing entirely to the care and skill of the London doctors she stayed with us so long. It is bad enough as it is, but we could scarcely have borne the loss had it been as you supposed."

Which view of the case happened to be perfectly true, although Lord Kemms imagined the speaker was mistaken.

Having had a hand in damaging the Protector, his Lordship felt, naturally, anxious to prove that Company the origin of all evil.

Since, in the course of a mysterious Providence, Lally was to die, he would have felt happy to demonstrate that the Protector had, directly or indirectly, been instrumental in killing her.

Now, however, Alick Dudley cut the ground from under his feet. If Lally's short existence had been prolonged, even for an hour, by the skill and kindness of the London doctors, it was impossible for Lord

Kemms ever again to insinuate that residing in town had hastened her death.

On that score, at all events, Arthur had no reason to reproach himself, which was fortunate, since when he returned to Berrie Down after the funeral, he felt his burden was quite as heavy as he could bear.

He was pressed for money; his dreams of wealth were vanishing away like mist wreaths; his shares he feared would never return him even a quarter of the sum he had expected to make by them; the half-yearly dividend had been unsatisfactory; his directors were irritable, the shareholders discontented.

He knew he must shortly let the Hollow, in order to rid himself of farming expenses, and to provide certain funds for paying the interest of the money for which Berrie Down was already mortgaged. He had not merely lost money senselessly, but squandered it foolishly; and to a man who had for so many years of his life looked honestly after sixpences, there was something very terrible in the reflection that he had got himself into debt through unthinkingly spending sovereigns.

In addition to all these causes for regret, Arthur added that peculiarity of his own temperament, which valued whatever was lost or in jeopardy far above any secure or present possession; and the feeling that the Hollow would soon to a great extent cease to be his own property, caused him to view every tree and shrub about it, every stick and thorn, with an appreciative affection as novel as it was painful.

His love for wife, children, property, kindred lay latent until some chance circumstances accidentally revealed its existence to himself; and most probably

the first time he ever really placed a proper value on Berrie Down was when he saw it in the dead of winter, its evergreens bright and glossy as ever; its lawn sloping away towards the west, the grand old trees tossing their branches in the keen north blast, all passing away from him and his; passing away from the descendants of those who had held the place for centuries.

He meant to remain at the Hollow for the night; he had much to talk over with Ned, many arrangements to make, fifty things to see to; and so he and Cuthbert, and Mr. Croft, who had declined the hospitality of Kemms' Park, were all to stay in the now deserted-looking rooms until the following morning, while Alick returned to town by the latest night-train from Palinsbridge.

It was necessary for him, if he wished to catch this train, to start away from Berrie Down before nine o'clock; and while the young man was out in the yard impressing this fact on Ned's comprehension, Mr. Croft came and stood beside him.

It was a moonlight night, stormy but still fine. The wind blew great masses of clouds over the moon's face, and then swept it clean and bright again.

"You will have rather a rough drive over," Mr. Croft remarked; and Alick, backing the pony into the shafts, sulkily answered, "Yes, it looks like it."

"Can Ned not harness the pony for you?" was the next question.

"If he tried very hard, perhaps he might," Alick replied.

"Perhaps he will be good enough to try hard, then,"

said Mr. Croft; "and perhaps you would have the kindness to walk a few yards with me down the Lane. I want to speak to you."

"To me?" repeated Alick, in surprise.

"Yes; to you, particularly," was the reply.

"I will bid Arthur 'good-night,' and be with you directly," the other agreed; and accordingly in a few minutes Mr. Croft and he were walking along Berrie Down Lane, past the pond, and under the elms and beeches that sheltered the road beyond.

"There is bad blood between us," began the elder man, after they had paced on for a short distance side by side in silence. "There is bad blood between us, and I am sorry for it; but it is natural that you should both dislike and distrust me."

"Was that what you brought me here to say?" Alick inquired.

"No; consider it as my opening sentence, — the stamp with which I have broken the conversational ice; now I can go on. You remember, of course, where you first saw me?"

"It is not likely I should soon forget such a pleasure," was the reply.

"You are satirical, but I am shot proof," Mr. Croft remarked; "you recollect, then, that Sunday afternoon in North Kemms' church, and the girl who kept her eyes fixed so demurely on her prayer-book, which I had afterwards the happiness of restoring to her?"

"And in which you placed a letter," added Alick.

"And in which I placed one of a series of letters," amended Mr. Croft; "good — you remember her?"

"As well as I remember you," was the reply.

"Where is she now?"

The moon sailed out from behind a cloud, as suddenly and sharply Mr. Croft put this question, looking full in Alick's face while he did so.

"Where is she now?" the younger man repeated, "why, do *you* not know?"

"If I did, I should not come to you for information. Listen to me," he rapidly proceeded, "I would give my right hand to know where she is. I would give a man anything almost he liked to ask, if he only proved to me she were alive and well. You were fond of her, were you not, boy? it vexes you to hear that there is no one belonging to her, no one on whom she has a claim — not even myself who can say where she is, whether living or dead; but what is your trouble to mine? When I looked in your face a moment since, my last hope vanished. I thought perhaps she might have gone to Heather — to Mrs. Dudley, I mean."

"Would you have me understand that she never went off with you?" Alick interrupted. He stood still in the very middle of Berrie Down Lane as he spoke, and the shifting light gave a wild, curious expression to his face. "Do you think I am so simple as to believe —"

"My dear fellow, I do not think you simple, and it is immaterial to me what you believe; but I want to know where your cousin is to be found. I desire, at least, assurance of her safety, comfort, and — should such a miracle be possible — happiness."

"And by what right do you dare to ask anything about her," demanded Alick; "you a married man, you who never ought to have written her a line, or met her, or — or —"

"I do not beg you to walk on here with me to-

night in order to answer your questions," Mr. Croft interrupted; "my object was merely to put one or two of my own. To my first, your face has already replied. I see you know nothing of your cousin's whereabouts. If you should do so, will you at all events let me know that you have heard from or seen her, and that she is well?"

"No," Alick Dudley replied, "I will not."

"That settles my second question," observed Mr. Croft. "Now, the last point on which I desire information is this: does Mrs. Dudley know we have met before, and where?"

"She knows I have seen you," was the answer; "but I have not told her when, or where, or what I suspect."

"That is to say, Mrs. Dudley does not in any way connect me with your cousin's disappearance?" Mr. Croft remarked inquiringly; and when Alick answered in the affirmative, he proceeded:

"Will you still respect my secret, so far as you know it?"

"I shall make no promise," Alick answered.

"At least, will you let me tell my story for myself?"

"There is nothing to prevent your doing that," the other replied, "any more than there is to prevent my telling mine."

"You are sternly uncompromising," said Mr. Croft.

"I should be sorry to compromise with a seducer and a villain," was the reply.

"You are talking at random, boy, on a matter concerning which you know literally nothing," the person so politely addressed observed, sadly. "Had I spoken

to an older man, as I have spoken to you to-night, I should not have been so repulsed."

"Possibly not by an older man like yourself," retorted Alick, with a sneer.

"Good-night," said Mr. Croft, "we will not spoil our naturally sweet tempers by further argument. Here comes Ned. Shall we shake hands over it? No; good-bye then, and pleasant thoughts as you travel to town. Some day you will think you have not been all in the right in your judgment of me; but I do not quarrel with you for that judgment. It is human to err, and your humanity has erred, perhaps, on the safest side. On a safer side than mine, certainly," he muttered, as Alick, jumping up beside Ned, took the reins, and, with a cold farewell to Mr. Croft, drove off at a rattling trot along Berrie Down Lane, and thence through Fifield to Palinsbridge.

As they passed Fifield church, the moonlight fell clear and cold on the mound of freshly-turned mould, which was heaped over the spot where Heather's darling lay all alone, and the tears came welling up into Alick's eyes when he thought of the dead child.

Any one might have imagined that such tears must soften the heart, and render it for the time, at least, pitiful and tender even to a sinner; but no such change was wrought on Alick Dudley's mood.

All the way up to town, sitting in a corner of the compartment, he pondered over his interview with Mr. Croft — pondered and wondered; but it never once occurred to him that perhaps he had judged the man harshly, that he had repulsed his semi-confidence very rudely.

He was a sinner — he was all Alick had said; over

and over again the youth kept repeating these statements to himself; over and over he found it necessary to refresh his spirit with them, for his conscience did not feel quite satisfied concerning the interview.

Still he had done right, and though the right might be unpleasant and ungracious, it was nevertheless necessary to be performed. Young though he might be, Alick Dudley knew enough of human nature to be aware Mr. Croft was for some reason or other in very grievous trouble: to be confident, he never would have spoken to him had the subject not been one, as he implied, of vital importance to his peace; but what of that? If he were in trouble, so much the better; if he were anxious and grieved, it was nothing but what he deserved.

He had been kind to Lally, it is true; but, again, what of that? In the eyes of Alick Dudley, Douglas Aymescourt Croft seemed the incarnation of evil, of hypocrisy, of treachery, and of sin.

With all his heart and with all his soul, Alick hated the man — hated him all the more, perhaps, because he felt quite confident, if Mr. Croft once told his tale to Heather, he would deceive her also somehow, perhaps even move her to pity.

And Alick held in those days the pleasant creed, that no human being who went wrong should ever be pitied. Not even the look of Mr. Croft's face, as he stood eager and anxious, waiting for Alick's answer, had been able to soften the youth. Rather, in his stern rectitude, he now blamed himself for having been over-lenient, for having been unduly tender to this wretch who had deceived Bessie, and wrought for her

perhaps such misery as he himself was unable to contemplate calmly.

Out and away with him; on a gallows as high as Haman's, Alick would willingly have hung him; and, after all, to come to me! thought this modern Joshua — to come to me!

Ay, there was Mr. Croft's mistake; perhaps he never had been very young himself, or perhaps the feelings of his youth lay so far back in the book of years, that he forgot how stern and hard young people, who can be trusted, usually are in their judgments. Be this as it may, the result of the interview had proved different to what he expected, and he returned to the Hollow, smiling a little bitterly as he thought time would teach Alick Dudley a different lesson; that possibly out of his own experience he might after a while acquire a little toleration in judging of others. And in this idea, who may say Douglas Croft was wrong?

True, it is only God who, knowing all about our sins and our temptations, is ever entirely merciful; but still, the more men learn of their own natures, the more fully they come to comprehend how easy it is to do wrong, and how difficult to do right; the closer they form an acquaintance with that lore which nothing except sorrow, and trial, and trouble, and experience can teach, the greater is the toleration with which they regard error; the greater is the diffidence which they feel about affirming of any human being, "In the sight of the Almighty, you are a very grievous sinner."

In precise proportion, as a man towards the close of his life is harsh and bitter, as he views with

loathing not the crime but the criminal, as he ventures to pass severe judgments on his fellow-creatures, so we may be certain his earthly education has been wasted.

It is natural for the young to air their indignation; natural and right, for they cannot conceive the power and might of those temptations which are strong enough to lead wiser people than themselves astray; which meet poor humanity like an armed man; which lurk like lions in the path, yea, are "like lions roaring on their prey."

In the young, it may reasonably be hoped that intolerance is an outward and visible sign of inexperience and innocence, but in the old and the middle-aged it can be regarded but as a token of folly, as a sign of a Pharisaic rather than a humble spirit; of a mental constitution swift to forget personal sins and to notice defects in others; of a bigoted proneness to measure the corn of all men's lives out of one bushel; of a pompous giving thanks to God for having made some people so much better than that poor, low, wretched, tabooed publican; of a disposition ready to find a mote in a brother's eye, forgetful of the beam which was so utterly displeasing in the sight of Him who has with his own lips assured us, that "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

CHAPTER XIV.

Woman to Woman.

FEMININE curiosity, we may take it for granted, is sometimes less keen than feminine grief. If it were otherwise, in what way, I pray you, should any one account for the fact, that some weeks passed away, from the night of Lally's death, without Heather Dudley knowing all the particulars of Bessie's existence from the hour when she left Berrie Down, till she reappeared in Lincoln's Inn Fields?

In truth, the mother's sorrow was very terrible; so engrossing, that it nearly deadened all desire to ascertain the particulars of another human being's life; besides which, there was a mystery about Bessie — a mystery Heather, in the midst of her grief, intuitively felt chary of intruding on. She wished no one to hear of her return; she came at night to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and was admitted privily by Tifford, whom probably she had bribed to secrecy, for none of the other servants ever heard of her visits. She wore a ring, a golden wedding-ring, and yet her face was not the face of a happy woman. She volunteered no particulars of the events which had intervened between the time when she stole away from the Hollow like a thief in the night, till she returned to see Lally before she died. She was sweeter than of old, but she was also sadder, and her beauty, neither dimmed nor diminished, was yet changed.

All these things Mrs. Dudley beholding, even

through her tears, might have marvelled at, though she never inquired into them, until one day there arrived a note from Bessie, saying, "I can tell you no more, dear Heather, unless you will visit me. Come to me once, at all events; I want to speak to you, and I want to show you something."

Dressed in her deep mourning, Heather repaired to the address given — a first floor in Roscommon Street, Pentonville.

What a mean street it was — what small, close rooms that pretty Bessie had selected; and yet, when Heather came to sit down beside the fire, with her old friend's hand clasping hers, she forgot all the words of remonstrance she had intended to speak, and listened to Bessie's sorrowful apologies.

"It is not exactly the kind of parlour I should have liked to ask you to spend a day in, Heather," she said; "but beggars, you know, cannot be choosers; and I wanted to talk to you so much — so much — and to show you something, if you do not mind."

"If I do not mind!" Heather repeated, wonderingly.

"Yes, sweet — my child!" and, with the colour mantling in her cheeks, Bessie went into the next room, her bedchamber, and brought thence a baby — a great, staring, fat baby — with pink feet, and arms that looked as though cord had been tied tightly round the wrists, so deep were the rolls and wrinkles of flesh, so high the mountains and so deep the intermediate valley.

Is it necessary for me to describe what followed during the course of the next ten minutes? What woman is there who does not know exactly how Heather

took the little fatuous-looking lump of mortality to her heart and cried over it; who cannot conceive how Bessie, sitting on a low stool, gazed at the meaningless features of her child, which cooed and clung to Heather, and dabbed its fists in her face, and crowed with delight at the sweet eyes bent upon it, and kicked in an ecstasy of infantile excitement at all the notice "mamma's company" was taking of mamma's autocrat.

Of course there was weeping. Heather could not so soon forget her own first-born as to forbear shedding tears at the sight of Bessie's baby; and then Bessie cried, and, finally, the autocrat yelled, which ebullition of feeling did more towards restoring the mental equilibrium of the two ladies than one of the Church homilies or a charge from the Archbishop of Canterbury could have done.

And still Heather asked no questions, while Bessie, having brought in her boy's cradle, sat rocking him to sleep. Mrs. Dudley, spite of that child, the mean lodgings, the tangible wedding ring, refrained from cross-examination. In an earlier part of this story, it has been stated that Squire Dudley's wife knew when to keep a discreet silence, but it has not been stated that she frequently did not know when to speak.

She was sensitive to a fault; and so now, though she felt dying to know, and Bessie sat longing to tell, there ensued a silence which the latter at length broke with —

"Heather, why is it that you have never reproached me? how does it happen you had not a single hard word — nothing but love, and tears, and kisses for

me, who repaid your kindness with such bitter ingratitude?"

"My darling! why should I reproach you?" Heather answered. "What am I that I should be hard upon you, *however it may be?*"

"And how do you think it is, Heather?" asked her friend, turning from the child, now fast asleep; "what is your opinion about the matter?"

"I would rather not form any," was the reply.

"But you must, dear," Bessie declared; "you are thinking even now about me. What is the conclusion at which you have arrived?"

"I was only marvelling!" Mrs. Dudley answered. "If you are married, where is your husband — why are you here? if you are not married — oh! Bessie, sweet, forgive me!"

"Forgive you, Heather!" Bessie answered, "forgive you! If you think even the implication of such a misfortune so hurtful to me, what will the reality prove to you, Heather? I am not a married woman, spite of this — and this" — she pointed to ring and infant — "I am no more married in the eye of the law, than I was when I left Berrie Down!"

"God help you!" Heather murmured, softly.

"Ay, God help me, indeed!" Bessie repeated. "Sometimes, sitting here alone, I think He has dealt with me very hardly; but, then, I look at my child and grow patient. I want to tell you my story, if it will not weary you."

"Weary me!" Heather exclaimed.

"You do not draw away from me — you do not regard me as a pariah," Bessie continued. "If I were to go to my mother now, and tell her what I am

about to tell you, she would order me out of the house, and address me for ever after with the door-chain up. Do you understand me clearly, Heather Dudley?" she said, almost impatiently. "I am not a married woman, and yet I am a mother! Shall I fetch your shawl and bonnet, and send for a cab, and bid you farewell for ever? Don't you hate to touch me? Is the room not oppressive in which I breathe the same air with you?" and, as she spoke, Bessie rose excitedly, and would have moved farther away but that Heather caught and chid her for her want of faith.

"I am your friend, love," she said in the low tone which had such a virtue of healing and leisure in it —"not your judge. We are woman to woman now, Bessie, tell me what you will."

Then Bessie, flinging herself on her knees, buried her face in the folds of Heather's dress, and sobbed aloud. "I have sinned," she said, "I have sinned, but not willingly; my greatest guilt was my deceitfulness, my sly ingratitude."

"You were deceitful," Heather answered. "Oh! Bessie, how could you, how was it possible for you, to engage yourself to Gilbert Harcourt, caring, as you must have done ——"

"Heather, you are wrong," broke in Bessie; "I was engaged to Gilbert Harcourt before I ever saw the — the — father of my child. You know what a life I had at home; you know any life would have seemed preferable to that. Across it in an unlucky hour Mr. Harcourt walked. He fell in love with me — he was a good creature and a kindly, and so, though I did not care for him in the least, I said yes

when he asked me to marry him — said yes, prompted and badgered thereto by my mother, and so became engaged.

"What is the idea of the world in such matters? Is it not almost that a woman engaged is a woman married? Such was my idea, at all events; but I wearied of the tie before long; it is hard always to remember one is engaged to a man for whom one does not care two straws. That was my case with Gilbert Harcourt. I tried hard to like him, but I failed; my sin as regards him was ever promising to become his wife, not in breaking my promise; is it not better to part even at the altar-rails than to take false vows before God? I played a double game for months and months — there was my error; but I was a coward, and I dare never have faced my mother had I told her my repugnance to marrying the suitor she favoured; besides, my other suitor did not come forward. Oh! Heather, Heather, I felt so miserable and so wicked at the Hollow, I felt so deceitful and false amongst you all. My love, had *you* been my mother, I never should have been sitting here to-day, a wife, and yet no wife; had you not been my friend, God only knows where I should have been to-day, perhaps dead, perhaps living in sin, certainly not here, struggling feebly to do right, to atone for my transgression, striving to forget the only man I ever loved, Heather, the only man I ever loved."

She put her hand to her head and moaned as she spoke — moaned like one in some bodily pain.

"Bessie," whispered Heather, bending low, "don't speak to me about your trouble, dear, if it pains you to do so. I do not require to hear ——"

"But I require to tell you," Bessie broke in vehemently. "We met, he and I, after I was engaged to Gilbert, where do you think, Heather? in a railway carriage, and he never spoke to me, and I never spoke to him for forty miles while the train rushed on to the lonely country place where I was travelling to spend my Christmas — the Christmas previous to that I passed with you. Mamma and I had quarrelled that morning, and, in consequence of our quarrel, I missed the train by which my friends expected me; the result of this was, that when I arrived at Thirkell no one met me, and there I was stranded at about nine o'clock of a winter's night on the platform of a lonely country station, where such a luxury as a fly was unknown, and the parsonage whither I was bound three miles off.

"Had it not been for the manner in which I parted from my mother I should have returned to town by the next train due at Thirkell, the station-master informed me, at 10.25 P.M. As things were, however, I decided on making the best of my way to Holston Vicarage on foot, protected by a porter six feet high, who declared his willingness to take charge of me.

"All this time my travelling companion was engaged in sending a telegram to town, to which he said he should wait an answer, and 'in the meanwhile,' he added, turning to me, 'if you are not afraid of the cold, my man can drive you over to Holston and be back here quite as soon as I shall require him.'

"What should you have done under the circumstances, Heather? dropped a pretty curtsey and answered — 'Thank you, sir, but my mamma would not

be pleased if she heard of my accepting any civility at your hands, and as I am a good child and like to do what my mamma tells me, I will walk, if you please, all along the dirty lanes to Holston, and make myself as uncomfortable as it is possible for a human being to render herself?'

"That would have been proper, would it not, man being woman's natural enemy? I, however, preferring impropriety to discomfort, accepted his offer, was helped by him into a dog-cart, which seemed to me about five storeys high, thanked him, bade him good night, and in twenty minutes was set down at the door of Holston Parsonage, when, of course, my friends had quite given me up. Oh! dear," Bessie sighed, "oh! dear, to think that so simple a thing should be the beginning of so much trouble!"

"And after that ——" Mrs. Dudley suggested.

"After that, how did we meet?" the girl replied; "the first time it was on the road, and we bowed; next time, we spoke. The people I was staying with were old as the hills, and never took a walk by any chance. I did, unhappily; and so at length it came to pass that we — he and I, met on the downs, in the lanes — sometimes here, sometimes there — but still constantly. I think," added Bessie, "we both fought against our wish to see each other in those days — I know I did — I know I chose each morning I went out a different path, but let me go which way I would I met him.

"At last, I thought I had better return to town, but he followed me to London. Can you fancy what it was, Heather, to return to that horrible engagement — to the sight of a man now grown positively distasteful? No, you cannot, love, I know; God forbid you should.

What next? we met in town, we met at the sea-shore; and still I did try to avoid him. You believe me, Heather, I did strive with all my heart to do my duty to Gilbert and forget the other, but it was impossible; I loved the last, I had grown absolutely to dislike the first. It was no negative feeling I had for my affianced husband then, it was active aversion. Oh! Heather, then came the part of my life I hate to look back upon. I was not honest, I was not open. When in a fit of repentance, for such I know now it must have been, he disappeared from Southend, where we were then staying, I never told Gilbert I was changed. I let him come on — on — I allowed them all to talk about my marriage; and I meant to marry him, loving the other all the time, and only angry at his having, as I considered, deserted me."

"Did he — did the one you were fond of know of your engagement to Gilbert?" Mrs. Dudley replied.

"Ah! Heather, do you think there was anything I kept from *him?*" Bessie answered; "and, if I had not been the stupid goose I was, his manner might have told me there must be something wrong. He listened to me, and he thought the affair over, as it seemed, in his mind; and then be begged me to give Gilbert up, but he never said, 'I will come forward and shield you from the storm you dread.' No, he only said, 'If you love me, you will have nothing to do with him.' But I was afraid, afraid of my mother, afraid of being found out, afraid of our being parted, and I had never seen any good in all my life, and how could I be good and firm — how was it possible?"

"My poor child! my poor darling!" Heather murmured.

"You do not know Southend," Bessie said, looking up in the face which was bent down over her. "You do not know Southend. People tell me it is not a nice place, but it was as the kingdom of heaven to me. There are walks along the shore to Leigh, and walks beyond Leigh to Hadleigh; there is a way along the shore to Shoeburyness, and there are delicious field-paths leading to farm-houses, which seemed to me the very abodes of peace and contentment. Oh! those days — those sunshiny happy days! You are crying, love, what is it? Are you sorry for me? I was a poor weak treacherous girl; but so happy, darling, so blessed!"

And Bessie covered her face with her hands, and the tears came trickling through her fingers. They had indeed been happy days, but they were gone, and she sat weeping for the bliss which had been; whilst Heather, thinking of the sunshine and bliss her own life had lacked, could not choose but weep also.

"Then suddenly he went away," Bessie resumed, "and soon afterwards I came to stay with you; in your house I learned that summer my alphabet of a better life. Unconsciously, women like you, Heather, mould and purify other women; you are as the salt which salteth the earth — you are as the leaven hid in the three measures of meal ——"

"Stop, Bessie dearest," entreated Heather. "Have not you, even you, said within this last fortnight, I was hard to my husband, and I have been hard and unsympathetic, and wrapped up in my own grief, Lord pardon me?"

"But I did not mean that you were really hard," Bessie declared; "only that you were not quite the

Heather you used to be — the Heather who thought of Arthur before she thought of any one else — there, there — I must get on with my story or I shall never finish it. Where was I? — growing better — when *he* came after me once again, praying, pleading, assuring me, both by word of mouth and by letter, that it could not be right for me to marry a man I disliked; that if I persisted in keeping to my engagement I should be preparing misery for myself, for Gilbert, and for him.

"But still, he never said, 'I will come and claim you from him' — never once.

"How I strove to keep my engagement you may, perhaps, remember; but when he saw I was determined to be true to my promise, he grew desperate, and would have had me risk everything and go off with him then. He explained that he was placed in a difficult position in consequence of his father, on whom he was dependent, wishing him to marry a rich widow; and, of course, I was not so selfish as to desire that he should beggar himself for my sake; so we parted again. Oh, Heather, I did not sink without many a struggle, many a frantic effort to touch secure ground. Everything he told me was false, even to his name; for he assumed that of a cousin the better to deceive me; but I loved him then as I love him now; and then as now, I found it hard to see a fault in him.

"At last I could bear it no longer, and left with him as you know; we were married next morning at a church in the City — he had been residing in the parish for the requisite period — and, as we drove away from the door, I saw my father walking along the side path. I could have put out my hand and

touched his shoulder, but *he* prevented my speaking to him. He would not let me write to you or any one. He said some day he would avow our marriage, and, till then, I must be patient; and I was patient. I never wearied him. I never even felt fretful; if he had asked me to go to Iceland with him, I would have done it. I would have died for him.

"We were so happy," she continued, after a pause; "we had the loveliest cottage you can imagine in a distant county; and, though he said he was poor, I never felt any shortness of money; we never seemed to have anxiety about providing for the morrow's wants. My only trouble was his frequent absences; but still, spite of these, he spent a considerable part of his time with me, and he grew to know you and Arthur, and Lally, and the girls, as though you had all been members of his own household."

"You have more to tell me," Heather said, as Bessie paused.

"Yes," was the reply; "I have, the end of my story. One day, when we were out together, we met a gentleman whom my husband greeted with a certain annoyance and restraint. They seemed very familiar and intimate; but, still, Maurice — I always called him Maurice — did not introduce his friend to me, nor invite him to our house. After he left us, I asked his name.

"'Oh, that is my rich cousin,' Maurice said in reply. 'I hope he did not guess who you are.'

"'Why, would he tell your father?' I asked, and he answered 'No; he did not think so. He believed him to be a better fellow than all that came to; but he is a canting idiot,' he said, 'and has got so many strange

ideas. If he should happen to call, you must not see him; remember, you must not, Bessie!'

"I promised him that I would not, and I meant to keep my promise; but a fortnight afterwards — when my husband having gone up to London, I was alone — this same man stepped, without any announcement whatever, through one of the front windows opening into the garden, and, after very briefly apologising for his intrusion, and the fright he had caused me, commenced one of the most dreadful sermons you ever heard, Heather, and wound up by inquiring 'whether I had ever considered I was going down into hell and dragging his cousin there with me.'

"Thinking he was mad, I humoured him at first; but, after a time, finding there was a wonderful coherence in his discourse — that it was, in fact, too stupid to be the speech of a madman — I asked him, plainly, what he meant, entreating of him, in the same sentence, not to tell Maurice's father of his son's marriage; for that fear of bringing unhappiness on my husband was the only grief I had.

"Then it was his turn to look bewildered. 'Father — son — husband — Maurice!' he repeated in blank astonishment. 'My cousin's name is not Maurice, and has no father living. May I ask pardon if you are *married* to my — the gentleman I — met you with the other day?'

"'Certainly,' I answered; 'do you think I should be here if I were not?'

"'Then,' he said, 'it is my duty to tell you my cousin has most grossly deceived you. The marriage is not, cannot be, a legal one; for, to my knowledge, his wife is alive at the present moment.'

"After that," proceeded Bessie, "there is a blank in my memory — I suppose I fainted; it was a fearful blow to receive, but the man who dealt it stayed with me for nearly an hour, and was very kind and thoughtful towards me. He did not call the servants; he made no fuss; he threw a little water on my face, and let me struggle back to consciousness without drawing the attention of any one to my trouble. When I was quite recovered he begged my pardon for the mistake he had made in the first instance, and assured me, I think truly, that, had he guessed for a moment the depth of his cousin's treachery, he never would have been so abrupt.

"'But I spoke to him in his own house about you the other day,' he added, 'and he bade me mind my own business, and not interfere with his — who you were or what you were, he said, was his concern, and his only. So then I determined that you should not perish eternally for want of a word spoken in time.'

"I let him go on for some minutes — I let him preach to his heart's content, and then I said:

"'You have told me his faults — now show me his excuse. He was forced to marry against his will. His wife is old, ugly, ill-tempered. He never loved her; it was a marriage of convenience, which he was compelled into by others.'

"He knew what I was thinking of — he guessed I was seeking an apology to stay with him. He had sense enough to see I would have given life itself to hear his wife was a hideous old shrew. He had not human feeling sufficient to understand my mad jealousy, but he could not help seeing it was not accusations

against my husband I wanted to hear. Oh no! it was the defence I was panting for.

"'He married young,' was the reply, 'a lady of equal age, well born, wealthy, beautiful, accomplished, virtuous. They do not live happily, it is true; but she was his own free choice. He was rich and independent enough always to marry whomsoever he pleased.'

"'And his real name?' I asked.

"Then he told me, and then only I fully understood how cruelly I had been deceived — what a tissue of falsehoods his story had been from first to last, from beginning to end. He had passed himself off to me as the man who now sat explaining the depth of my misery to me. I showed him the certificate of my marriage, and he said, 'Yes; according to this the bridegroom was myself. What shall you do now? You will not, I trust, make the matter public, nor think of prosecuting him.'

"Prosecuting him! I stared at him as I repeated the words. Bring trouble to the man I loved! What did he think I was made of, I wonder, to expect I should turn in a moment like that? Husband or no husband, he was still dearer to me than anything on the face of God's earth; and so I told this bearer of bad tidings, who then seemed to fear I should fall, as he expressed it, into deeper sin; that my beauty — he had the grace to admit I was beautiful — should prove a worse snare than ever to his cousin, a lure of the devil to trap him to destruction.

"I could not bear any more after that. I asked him if he were a clergyman, and he said no; that the sect to which he belonged approved of lay preachers,

and that all men were ministers whom the grace of God moved to speak His word.

"'And do you imagine such lecturing will do me any good?' I said; 'do you not know you are taking the most likely means to make me remain where I am? Do you consider it is a light trouble which has befallen me? Do you expect me to feel grateful to you for bringing news which has utterly destroyed my happiness? for I was so happy — so happy.'

"'Sinfully happy,' he said.

"At that I fired up. Where was the sin, I asked, when I knew nothing of it? Why could he not have left me alone, now the thing was done and past, and that no act of mine could undo it? Why did he come there? I raved, I think I must have done, for at length he said he would leave me for a season, and return the next day when I grew calmer, and more willing to listen to the voice of consolation.

"'Meaning yours,' I suggested.

"'I will help you, if you permit me,' he answered; 'help you with advice — money to go back to your friends.'

"'No,' I said, 'you will not. You have done what you consider your duty; and, if I do not thank you for your misjudged kindness, it is only because I find it difficult to speak ordinary words of courtesy when my heart is broken. There is nothing more you can do for me — all the rest lies between him and me — between him and me and God, and in the bitterness of our future no man shall meddle.'

"'As you wish,' he answered; 'only tell me one thing more: have you friends to whom you can apply

for assistance? I only ask that I may feel you are not quite desolate.'

"This touched me a little. 'I have one friend,' I said, 'who would not, I know, turn from me in any distress or difficulty.'

"'And that friend —'

"'Is a woman,' I finished, 'and one not of my own kindred nor of mine own house; but I shall not go to her, and what I mean to do I shall not tell you.'

"He turned and looked at me doubtfully; then he said, 'May I call to-morrow?' to which I answered, 'Yes,' if he would only leave me then.

"Twice on his way to the window he stopped and hesitated; and while he went down the garden, I saw him clasp his hands as if praying.

"I longed to fling a book after him; but I was wrong, Heather, I was wrong. I believe him to have been a good man, though he did come and take all the sunshine out of my life in a minute, for it was such sunshine, and I was so happy.

"When he left me, then, for the first time, I realised my position. I will not tell you, Heather, what I passed through during the hours that followed. There was a time when I knew, if such a temptation had been presented to me, I should have yielded to it; but I thought of you, and that thought made me strong. I seemed to hear your voice calling me away. I fancied I could see your eyes pleading — pleading for me to leave; you saved me, Heather. I should have stayed on, had I never known you; I should have stayed on or drowned myself — the temptation swayed now to sin, now to suicide, and when I left his house, I do not think I knew exactly whether it was to be

life or death, — whether I would end the struggle or endure it. I believe I was mad."

"And how long is it since all this happened?" Mrs. Dudley inquired.

"Months and months ago," was the reply. "How far I walked that night, all through the darkness, I should be afraid to say; for how many days and nights I wandered purposelessly on, I could not tell you: my mind took no account of time or distance. It was in the autumn, and the weather lovely. I kept to the field-paths and the lonely lanes; I avoided high roads, and railway stations, and towns. I had no object in view except to get a long distance away from him; and where I should ultimately have walked to, I cannot imagine, had my strength been equal to my will; but it was not. I dropped down one morning on a piece of green sward under the shelter of some elm-trees, (the place reminded me of Berrie Down Lane,) and I thought I was dying. I saw a house in the distance, and strove to crawl on towards it, but failed in the attempt. I do not remember anything after that, until I found myself lying in a strange bed in a strange room, with my baby beside me.

"English Samaritans dwelt in the house I had seen amongst the trees, and some of them finding me lying dead, as they thought, by the wayside, carried me in. I was ill for months, and during the whole of that time they never asked me who I was, or whence I came. Voluntarily, however, I told them my story, and then they would have had me stay with them always, and teach their children, and give such poor service as I could in exchange for board and lodging.

"I agreed to do so; but, before I settled down, I

felt I must see you once more, and hear how Lally was. So I made my way to the Hollow, where learning from Ned that she was not expected to live, I travelled straight on to London, — and you know the rest. I will go back to my friends very shortly now. I have written to tell them the reason why I could not return before."

"But why not stay in London, Bessie?" inquired Mrs. Dudley.

"Because I am poor," was the reply, "and I must now work for myself and my child; because I shall be safe there from any fear of meeting him, — because I have nothing to keep me in London, excepting you; and you, Heather — will let me write to you occasionally, will you not?"

"That was not the way in which you intended to finish your sentence," remarked Heather, with a smile.

"No," Bessie answered, frankly, "it was not."

"You were going to say you could not come to see me quite safely, because you thought I knew something of the person who has brought you to this, my child."

"Don't, Heather — don't!" Bessie pleaded.

"I am to ask no questions, then? I am not to inquire his name; but there is one thing I may do, love, and that is tell you what his cousin would not, that if it be the individual I suspect, he is one of the most miserable men on earth."

"And do you think he really loved me?"

"How should I be able to tell that?" Heather answered; "and you must talk of love no more in connection with him, Bessie; for love becomes sin, when

it is impossible for it to produce other fruits than shame and sorrow."

After that the two women sat silent for a time, — Bessie holding Heather's hand, and Heather stroking Bessie's hair gently and thoughtfully.

Little more than twelve months before, Heather had told Alick she did not know much about wickedness herself, and behold, already she was coming dimly to understand, that no human comprehension of life can be perfect, the boundaries of which exclude from sight, all evil, all passion, all temptation, all repentance, all despair.

CHAPTER XV.

Difficulties.

The new year brought with it no increase of business to the Protector Bread and Flour Company.

On the contrary, several pairs of stones were standing idle at Stangate, and night-work was now a thing unheard of. Many men were discharged on account of "slackness," and the labour of those that remained resulted rather in the accumulation of stock than in the execution of orders.

Orders to be executed had become, in fact, few and far between.

As for the bakehouse, it happened fortunately, perhaps, that no gentlemen of the press desired to see it in the later days of which I am writing, for it had become like one of those places in Pompeii, where, although the implements and utensils necessary for carrying on a trade still exist, the trade itself is a memory. Six months in London being about equivalent to six hundred years in Pompeii, the once busy courtyard and works now resembled nothing so much as a City of the Dead.

Over the Protector something worse than lava had flowed; and, although there was stock everywhere, — stock, and to spare — wheat in quantity, sacks and sacks of flour, still every one looked gloomy, — every one felt that "things were going queer."

Half of the vans were now never pulled out of the sheds; a large number of the horses — creatures that,

as we know, eat their heads off when standing idle in the stable — were sent to Gower's and sold there by public auction; stripped of their fine liveries, many of the "Company's servants" were now driving unornamental carts about the City, thankful to earn their guinea a week and supplemental pots of beer, wherever such terms were obtainable; most of the Company's depôts were closed, and had large bills stuck upon the shutters, signifying "that these desirable premises were TO LET;" the rounds were shorter than of old, and the men now stopped to get half-pints of ale anywhere they liked without reprimand or dismissal.

A cloud of general depression had settled down upon the directors, the shareholders, and the employés of the Company; there was nothing much doing at Stangate, and there was less in Lincoln's Inn Fields. About the former establishment, Mr. Robert Crossenham walked disconsolately with his hands in his pockets; before the fire, in the latter, Arthur Dudley read the *Times* diligently, and smoked the last Havannas he was ever likely to have presented to him free of charge.

In the outer office, the clerks consumed walnuts in quantity, pelted each other with the shells, and looked at their watches, or the clock half-a-dozen times in the course of an hour.

Business was, in a word, as bad as the weather, and that could not by any possibility have been worse. The sky, as regarded the physical world, was leaden; the streets, sloppy; the air, raw; east winds prevalent; in the City, things were drooping; stocks, heavy; rhubarb, a drug; indigo, blue; shares, flat; corn, falling; sugars, depressed; money, dear.

The only branch of commerce, the vigour of which did not seem impaired, was that of advertising. People advertised their wares in despair, thinking, if a smash were to come, they might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, — as well face Basinghall Street with a creditable list of debts as go through the Court for a few hundreds.

It was sink, or swim, with a vast number of persons during the earlier months of the year in question, and yet the papers never were so full of advertisements. The *Times* came out with daily supplements, and the *Telegraph* with its extra sheet; the *Standard* curtailed its usual quantity of letterpress, and the weeklies raised their prices per line, and would not guarantee immediate insertion. Not to be out of the fashion, the Protector Bread Company, Limited, announced each morning in the columns of the daily papers, "that pure bread was obtainable nowhere excepting at the depôts of the Company;" and every now and then a copy of an analysis from Daniel Smith, Esq., M. B., Ph. D., M. A., F. R. S., &c., Professor of Chemistry in the College of the Home Counties' Hospital, and Medical Officer of Health for Belgravia, was appended, stating that he had found a loaf of the Company's bread to contain so much of so many things, and to be perfectly free from a certain number of other things; that all articles used were of the best quality, and that he considered the process of manufacture employed at the Stangate Works, to be highly cleanly, and satisfactory.

But all this could not make the bread sell. The tide of fortune had turned, and the waters of success were ebbing away from the goodly ship "Protector" more rapidly than they had ever flowed in on the

commercial shore, where that once promising vessel now lay almost a wreck.

There was not a creature connected with it, however, who would admit that the venture was even in danger; and yet every person's temper became, if Arthur Dudley's report were to be believed, unbearable.

His own temper, never the most pliable, was severely tried; and now, instead of longing for each morning to dawn, in order that the business of the Protector might advance still further towards success, he hated to see day break — hated leaving his breakfast-room and going downstairs to meet those unpleasantnesses which had become of hourly, and momentary occurrence in his life.

Between his principals and the public, in fact, Arthur stood exposed to cross fires. He dreaded seeing a stranger enter the office; he looked forward to board-days with perfect horror.

His old enemy, General Sinclair, C. B., tormented him beyond all powers of expression. He seemed to think, that in Arthur's hands lay the power of making the Protector a failure or a success. He frequently declared, their secretary was inefficient — his business capabilities below contempt. When once matters began to go a little wrong with the Protector, he commenced laying all the blame at Mr. Dudley's door. He affirmed that Lord Kemms' open repudiation of any connection with the Company, was owing entirely to the secretary's lack of management; he called at the office, and told Mr. Dudley he considered a person, endowed with even the most moderate share of sense — an old friend and neighbour, moreover, of his lordship — might have

arranged the affair without permitting it to be brought under the notice of the public; and, in the course of subsequent conversations, he more than once hinted his opinion, that, although the gentleman he had the pleasure of addressing might be a gentleman, he was not much better than a simpleton.

To which innuendo, delicately implied, Arthur, with more spirit than might have been expected, considering the state of his finances, replied, that General Sinclair had ample reason for thinking any person who relinquished his independence for the sake of becoming servant to a dozen masters, must be either foolish or mad.

"For my part," added the secretary, "I believe when I was persuaded into having anything to do with the Protector, that I was both; and I can very truthfully say, if I could only get back the money I have lost by this confounded Company, I would cut the whole concern to-morrow. Meantime, sir, if you have any complaint to make of my conduct, I would thank you to bring it under the notice of the board. I am compelled to bear bullying once a week, but I will not endure it oftener."

Upon this, General Sinclair, boiling over with rage, inquired if he (Mr. Dudley) knew to whom he was speaking?

"Yes," Arthur answered, "I do; to that one of the directors of the Protector Bread and Flour Company, Limited, who took my place on the board when I resigned; and, with all my heart and soul, I wish I had never heard of the Protector, nor advanced a penny-piece for the purpose of bringing it before the public."

And every word that Arthur said, he meant. He

was sick and weary of his thankless office; of the preparation of unsatisfactory reports; of conversations with disheartened shareholders; of entering minutes of depressing proceedings.

Adversity, as has been stated, had not proved beneficial to the tempers of his directors, and stormy meetings were now the rule instead of the exception. Every man looked angrily on his neighbour; every orator believed the last speaker, and the speakers who had preceded him, wrong — practically and theoretically, root and branch; every creature had his own pet plan for restoring public confidence in the Company, and was wont to return home full of dismal forebodings, of doleful prophecies.

Mr. Black alone, perhaps, preserved his equanimity, and assured his colleagues, that, if they would only have patience, the tide must turn. For his part, he said, he had seen so many ebbs and flows, that he did not care a snap of the fingers for any temporary depression. People had not ceased to eat bread; and, although they might for a time have changed their baker, still the best article must secure custom in the long run. He vehemently protested against the closing of shops, and the reduction of vans. "Better to have given the bread to the nearest charity," he said, "than to have adopted such a course. Penny wise and pound foolish, he declared the policy adopted had been. He had advised putting on steam, instead of reducing the pressure, and reminded his fellow-directors of the fact; but of course," he added, "they knew best; their experience, no doubt, was greater than his; there was no knowing, indeed, what the best plan to pursue might be, till they found out which plan led to fortune or

failure. For his part, however, he thought it was always judicious in business, as at whist, when doubtful to play a trump. He would have played a trump, and if the game were to prove a losing one, he would, at all events, have lost with éclat; but, as he said before, he deferred to the superior wisdom of his colleagues, and only trusted their wisdom might in the long run prove profitable to all parties interested.

But the united wisdom of the directors of the Protector did not prove profitable, and every board-day more temper was exhibited, till at length the papers began to take the matter up, and the very journals who had written leaders concerning the philanthropic and admirable construction of the Company, now found spare corners which they filled up with paragraphs, headed, "The Protector Bread Company again;" or with letters from indignant shareholders, who could not understand the gross mismanagement which must exist somewhere in a company, the directors of which declared a dividend of fifteen per cent. per annum at the first half-yearly meeting, and found their profits during the second six months only enabled them to pay with difficulty two and a half per cent.! Truth was, as Mr. Black — who practically knew a vast deal more about the mind of the British public than the rest of the directors were likely ever to evolve out of their internal consciousness — declared, the very honesty of the board swamped the Company, or, at least, hastened its extinction. No subterfuges; no cooking of accounts; no hints to the secretary, that at the moderate expense of a bottle of good ink, a few quires of paper, and a hundred of pens, things might be made to look as pleasant as any body of shareholders need desire to

see them! it was all as though a doctor, being called in to see a bad case, were to lay the peril of his position before the patient — to exhibit to him, in its appalling nakedness, the poor chance he had of recovery.

"Enough to kill the man at once!" remarked the promotor to Mr. Robert Crossenham; "and enough to kill a company, if it had as many lives as a cat. What the devil do we want with directors or any board? If they would only find the money, I swear I'd find the brains. It is such a mistake, having so many masters. Well, if the 'Protector' goes smash, I shall always say, one of the finest pots of broth ever a man brought to boiling-point was spoiled by too many cooks having a hand in dishing it."

As for Mr. Stewart, he even, had his fits of irritability — his hours when he came to Lincoln's Inn Fields, and treated Arthur to his opinions.

He said, he felt perfectly confident there was something radically wrong about the Company, and he seemed to imagine Arthur could help him to discover where the wrong existed, if the secretary would only set his brains to work.

Some short time after Lally's death, he remarked, a little apologetically it is true, —

"I wish to Heaven, Dudley, you would bestir yourself! Surely, it is as much your interest as mine to find out what game Black is playing — for that he is playing some game, I am satisfied."

"If he be, I am ignorant of it," Arthur answered. "I presume you do not suspect me of playing into his hands?"

"No, Mr. Dudley, I do not," the director answered;

and from that day Mr. Stewart came seldom to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Whatever suspicions he might entertain concerning Mr. Black's immaculate honesty, he did not again take Arthur into his confidence, but left the secretary in undisturbed enjoyment of his office, where he had at least the variety of seeing the ship containing his fortunes sink a little lower, week by week.

But trade was bad with every one — so Mr. Black declared — so even Mr. Raidsford stated on one occasion, when he and Arthur, meeting in Lombard Street, the pair commenced singing a mutual Jeremiad over the state of things in the City.

"There is a general distrust," remarked the contractor, "for which I am quite at a loss to account, and a pressure for money, even upon good houses, which is unprecedented, at all events, in my experience. No doubt, as the spring advances, business will improve, and I most sincerely hope your shares may then feel the effect of greater commercial confidence."

All of which was said in the City oracle style, which, unwittingly, perhaps, Mr. Raidsford had contracted, and which impressed country people with the idea that he was a power in the state — a man who had risen quite as much by talent as by industry; and yet, spite of his mode of settling everything which was to occur in the future, Mr. Raidsford was more humble on that occasion than Arthur had ever before seen him.

He had less of the "I am the people, and wisdom shall die with me" manner, which had often angered the Squire in days gone by, than formerly; indeed,

if such an expression be not out of place in speaking of so great a man, his tone was almost humble; and while he sympathised heartily with Arthur's anxiety, he forbore reading him a lecture on the instability of all human companies, and did not, even from the heights of his own superior position, look down and say — "I told you how it would be. I, of course, who always see what is going to occur, told you; — don't blame me."

No, instead of this, he remarked, "it was a wonder the 'Protector' did not succeed, since the Company's bread was so good, and people must eat, you know." He added, "Certainly, however, a company, like an individual, adopting, and strictly adhering to, the system of ready cash, must be prepared to stand a considerable amount of knocking about at first; but I do hope things will brighten with you after a little — I really do;" having finished which speech, Mr. Raidsford went his way, and Arthur proceeded on his, thinking he liked the contractor better during that interview than he had ever done before, and regretting to see his former neighbour looking so thin, and anxious, and careworn.

Which facts, when, in due time, Arthur communicated them to Mr. Black, produced a careless comment, to the effect, "that very probably his Majesty had cause for uneasiness; people do say things are going deucedly queer up there; but there is no use talking," added Mr. Black, "things are queer with everybody. I never was so hard up in my life; discount is a thing past praying for. If you take a bill to the bank now, with, say, even my Lord Mayor's name on it, the manager looks at you as if

you were no better than a thief. It is no good being down-hearted, though; if care killed the cat, I still see no reason why care should kill us. We shall find the 'Protector' looking up yet, never fear, and the shares at a premium again. Deuce a share is at a premium in the City, I think, at this present minute of speaking. Where the money gets to, every now and then, passes my understanding. The parsons talk about riches taking unto themselves legs or wings, and fleeing away, or something of that kind, don't they? If their reverences were in my office for a month, they would find out there is more truth in the statement than most of them actually believe. Fly! by Jove! that's no word to express the pace they go at. Electricity is a fool to it;" and so Mr. Black rattled on, till Arthur, utterly overwhelmed, bade him "Good-day," feeling much too dispirited to put the question he had intended about those bills which would soon be falling due once again.

For things had come to such a pass, that Squire Dudley was compelled to cut down his expenditure by every possible means. Even at Berrie Down he never more scrupulously looked at a sovereign before changing it than now, when it occurred to him not merely as a possibility, but as a probability, that there might be a terrible reverse to the speculative picture to which, while the Protector was still a myth of the promoter's fancy, Mr. Black had acted as travelling showman.

No more visions of wealth and position for Arthur — no more dreams of standing for the county, of re-establishing the Dudleys as great people — of keeping

up a certain state at Berrie Down — of ease, and comfort, and competence.

His ideas in many respects were much changed since he came to London; and had it only been possible for him to see a way of ridding the Hollow of all the encumbrances he had thrust upon it, the secretary would have been a happy man.

Like the prodigal, he had gathered all together, and travelled into a far country — a strange country, where he met with those who helped him to waste his substance and devour his living.

And now, behold, the days of famine were at hand, when no man would give unto him; when he fell into even a worse plight than the poor sinner who would fain have satisfied his hunger with the husks the swine did eat; for the prodigal had a home to which he could return, while Arthur had none.

Longingly, sickeningly almost, his thoughts turned back to Berrie Down as he walked through the streets of the accursed City (so he styled London), where he had come to seek his fortune.

If the past could only be restored to him, he moaned in spirit, how differently he would act! If he only could have foreseen his present strait — if he only could have imagined such a termination to his hopes!

If — if — if! So the impotent, feebly-repentant strain ran on; if — if — if — although the measure of his misery was as yet nothing like full.

Berrie Down was still mortgaged for only half its value. He had his house in Lincoln's Inn Fields — his regularly paid salary — his shares, which might yet bring him in some return.

He was not involved past hope of extrication. Before his bills fell due again, Mr. Black would more than probably be able to meet them. The future did not lie shrouded in total darkness before him; but as he had been unreasonably sanguine, so he was now unreasonably depressed. He knew more about business, too, than had formerly been the case; he understood better that there were risks in it as well as certainties — blanks as well as prizes, and he could not blind himself to the truth that Fortune had not hitherto favoured him with so many smiles, as to justify his imagining she would never dishearten him with her frowns.

Besides all this, he was for the first time since his marriage wretched in his home. He could not bear to see his wife's sorrow — a sorrow in which she gave him no chance of sharing.

The changed, worn face — the eyes heavy with weeping, the weary, unelastic step — the silent grief which found no relief in words — were so many tacit reproaches for the cold selfishness which had kept them apart through the course of the years gone by.

Vaguely it began to dawn upon his understanding that nothing earthly can live for ever — that there is no plant so strong but the keenness of a prolonged frost may kill it; that if men do not enjoy and prize a blessing while it is blooming beside them, the day will surely come when they shall sigh for its fragrance, and its beauty all in vain.

He had neglected his wife's love in the years when that bright stream flowed through the fields of his existence, nourishing and making green as it poured its

treasures on his unthankful heart; and now the fountain gushed no longer; the spring was dried up, the waters made no gladness in the land. Where there had been life, there was lifelessness; where there had been devotion, there was indifference; where there had been championship, there was resentment, — and Arthur did not know how to put the wrong right. He had not strength sufficient in his character to set about winning Heather for the second time — wooing the woman as he had wooed the girl.

She had no idea her husband was in such trouble; she was ignorant of his fears as she had been of his hopes. No one told her Berrie Down was mortgaged — that it must be let, in order to pay the interest — that the Protector was tottering — that trade was wretched, that money was almost an extinct currency.

Mr. Black was the only person, indeed, she ever heard mention financial matters at all, and the words he spoke conveyed very little meaning to her understanding.

"Money," said that gentleman to Arthur one day when she chanced to be present — "money, what is it like? Can you remember ever having seen the article? The first five-pound note which comes my way, I intend to frame and keep by me, lest I should never behold another. Some people must be laying up for themselves a lot of treasures; but who they can be, puzzles my brain. According to his own account, not a soul I meet has sixpence in his pocket to keep the devil out of it. Do you happen to know any one, Mrs. Dudley, who has money, for I do not? As for me, I am thinking of applying for out-door relief — sending

Mrs. B. up to the workhouse for a couple of loaves. We are coming to it, fast as we can run."

"Some people have money, I suppose," answered Heather, remembering at that very moment she had a good round sum locked up in one of her drawers — which sum proved a perpetual plague to her — a plague and yet a comfort.

It was not her own, it was trust-money; and how the amount chanced to come into her hands, Heather never told to any one for many a day afterwards — for many and many a long day. And yet there was no particular mystery about the matter. Heather had the money from Mr. Douglas Croft, and it was given to her in this fashion: —

After due time, he came to condole with her on the death of Lally, and then his visits were repeated and repeated until Heather, who could not avoid guessing the nature of the feeling which drew him towards any of Bessie's kith or kin, began to grow uncomfortable — to imagine she ought to cut short the intimacy somehow, though it was beyond her imagination to conceive how she ought, under the circumstances, to do so.

Perhaps her manner showed her difficulty; perhaps Mr. Croft fancied truly, as the days went by, there was less cordiality in her smile, in the touch of her hand, in the tone of her voice! Anyhow, be that as it will, he took courage one day, and made his confession.

He attempted no apology; he did not strive to whiten the blackness of his sin to her. He did not even speak the name of the woman he had wronged. He merely said, "Some day she may come to you; some day she may want money. Let me leave a sufficient sum in your hands to keep her — if she be

living — from absolute poverty. Be to me my good angel! do not believe my repentance insincere because I cannot talk much about it. You are my last hope. If it be impossible for me to reach her through you, then indeed my case is desperate."

Naked he laid his sin out before her — naked as the new-born child, and yet he prayed her not to look askance upon it, but to pity and forgive. Well he understood — this man to whom the world and its ways were roads he knew from beginning to end, from the first chapter to the last — that to the woman whom he addressed the book of sin was almost as a dead letter, as a language unlearned, as a science incomprehensible.

Passion died out in her presence, vice found no defence sustainable when pleaded before that calm, impartial judge. She could not go with him in his agony of love, of struggling virtue, of wicked strategy, of unavailing repentance — she, whose life had never known the rush and tumult of an over-powering affection, who had never been adored, idolized, wronged, by any man, as it was in Douglas Croft's nature to adore, idolize, and wrong, — she, who was pure in thought and deed, pure almost as one of God's angels — how could he tell her of the over-mastering love which had overleapt all boundaries of prudence, all restraints of society, all divine laws, all human restrictions?

But he could appeal to her pity, and to her generosity. He could lay his future at her feet, and pray her to do with it as she would; to give him Bessie's address, if it came to her knowledge, or to withhold it; to menton his name to Bessie, or to preserve silence concerning him; to say, if Bessie ever wrote or came near, or

to ignore her existence, as she pleased — as she deemed best.

"I make no conditions, I ask no mercy, Mrs. Dudley," he said. "I place myself in your hands; and I merely entreat that you will do whatever seems to you best, regardless of my feelings. If I could only know she is living!" he added.

"She is living," Heather interrupted.

"Then you have seen her!" he said, eagerly; "is she in London?"

"You must not question me," Mrs. Dudley replied. "All I can tell you is — that — the girl, whose future you have made so wretched, is living. The greatest kindness you can do her now is to forget that such a person ever existed. I will keep this money, if you wish, in case she should ever really be in want of it. At present, I know, she would not take sixpence from you, and I cannot wonder at her feeling as she does towards you."

"Then you have seen her?" he inquired.

"Yes, and talked with her; and guessed who stole her from us — stole her away to shame, and grief, and suffering ——"

At that point he interrupted her, vehemently, "Why should she be ashamed," he asked, "for that which was no fault of hers? and was she not better, as she lived with me, believing herself to be a wife, than legally married to Harcourt — a man for whom she never cared two straws? Is not anything, any sin, any disgrace, any suffering, preferable to a loveless marriage? Answer me, truly, Mrs. Dudley," he persisted; "do you not believe it is?"

With her cheeks on fire, Heather rose and answered him — "Why do you put such a question to me, Mr. Croft — to me, of all women living?" and then she covered her face, and wept aloud — wept for the life she could never live over again, and which had been so poor a counterfeit of existence that she might almost — but for her early training, but for the conviction, that it is better to "suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" — have wished to change places with Bessie, in order to experience the sensation of being loved wildly and passionately, even though it were sinfully, and so round off the incompleted paragraph of her life; have the sad seventh resolved into the legitimate chord.

Heaven help her! she felt very weak and very miserable, surrounded by people, whose stories seemed all more perfect than her own; and Douglas Croft, listening to that unexpected outburst, felt in his soul there were more ways of deceiving a woman than by a sham marriage; more means of breaking a loving heart than by deceit, and falsehood, and wrong.

"God pardon me," he thought, as he walked slowly home; "but yet, have I been worse than Dudley? Is it more sinful to love and betray a woman, than to marry her without love?" and, as is usual with all such questions, he decided the matter in his own favour — never reflecting that two wrongs cannot make a right, that a volume of platitudes will never patch up a woman's reputation, nor enable her to go back again through the years, and begin her life anew.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Bubble Bursts.

All this time the affairs of the Protector were falling into a more hopeless state of confusion than ever.

No talk now of shares going up to a premium. If a man had offered a handful of them to a beggar in the street, they would scarcely have been accepted, excepting for pipe-lights. On the Stock Exchange, every person knew better than to touch them. The Company was given over by commercial doctors, and no one felt inclined to waste a guinea on propping it up. If trade would only take "a start," the directors remarked; but then, unhappily, trade did nothing of the kind.

Within eighteen months of the promising child's birth, one of the very objects for which Limited Companies are ostensibly established, namely, to provide such a capital as shall enable a certain number of traders to live through bad seasons, in the hope of better days coming — this object, I say, was utterly ignored.

To extend their business, the directors would not have hesitated to make a further call upon the shareholders; but to carry their business through a time of extreme commercial distress they refused to do anything of the kind. To have made a further voyage, Mr. Black told them, they would have crowded on all sail; but at sight of the first storm their seamanship proved useless, their courage failed them.

All in vain he and Mr. Stewart — united at last — moved and seconded various courageous resolutions; the other directors were cowardly, and refused to acquiesce. Mr. Black was twitted with the ill success of many of his bantlings; Mr. Stewart was reminded of the fact that his nephew had been the first to leave the ship.

"The very fust shares," remarked Mr. Smithers, the great miller at Plaistow, worth Heaven only knew how much money, and likely, before he died, to be worth a few hundreds of thousands more — "the very fust shares as was sold out of this here Company below their aktual market value was the property of your nephew, Mr. Stewart — your own nephew, Mr. Aymescourt Croft."

"Am I answerable for the misdeeds of my nephew?" Mr. Stewart inquired; whereupon Mr. Smithers declared he did not know; that perhaps, Mr. Croft had very good reasons for acting as he did, and that it might have been better for all parties concerned if "everybody had sold their shares," when Lord Kemms repudiated the Protector. Let the argument commence where it would, it always ended in Lord Kemms — it always reverted to the fact that Mr. Black had used his name without authority, and that Mr. Stewart's noble relative had been the first to damage the Company, as his nephew was the first to dispose of his shares.

The business men on the Direction attributed all the disasters of the Protector to having so many "nobs" on the Board; while the Sirs, and Generals, and gentlemen possessed of landed property conceived it was the City element which had militated against the success of their enterprise.

One singular fact in connection with this subject may here be noted, namely, that the men who had not paid for their shares at all, such, for example, as Mr. Smithers, General Sinclair, &c., were much more vehement concerning their disappointment than those who really held a large pecuniary stake in the Protector.

It is more difficult, perhaps, to bear with equanimity the loss of hope than the loss of money, and individuals who, like Arthur Dudley, had expected to realise fortunes out of nothing, were much more disheartened by the prospect of failure than persons who, having "paid their shilling, took their risk."

This remark applies only, however, to the directors. The shareholders having, one and all, hoped to realize their ten or twenty, or fifty or a hundred per cent., were as virtuously indignant as those members of the Board who had sold their names for scrip. Speculators all — gamblers as much as the man who stakes his last guinea on a throw of the dice — they were yet neither to hold nor to bind when the speculation turned out ill, when the throw of the dice threatened to leave them minus the money they had invested!

Truth is, shareholders have so long been commiserated instead of blamed; so long represented as victims instead of wilful dupes, that when the crash does come, they are for ever airing their grievances and wearying the public with records of folly that have now grown sickening, by reason of constant repetition.

Any man who, in these days, chooses to invest his savings in business, whether on his own sole risk

or in company with other adventurers, has no right to ask for pity if the project fail — if the boat sink. Ostensibly, he took his chance; if the result be unfavourable to his hopes, he has no right to claim either sympathy or help.

It is the greed of gain, the dislike of legitimate work, the desire for usurious interest, the weak senseless refusal to be guided by the experience of others, which bring misery to families as to individuals. If men are willing to listen to every pleasant tale, to believe any lie which is put on paper, to think that fortune will make an exception in their favour, cause the sun to stand still, and suspend all the ordinary laws of commerce for their benefit, they must take the consequences.

No legislation can protect fools against the results of their own folly; no government is bound to find brains for the governed. Shall we pity a man who is deceived by a thimblerigger, or fleeced by his chatty travelling acquaintance who, on the long northern journey, produces a pack of cards, and proposes a game merely to while away the time! And in like manner, shall we, at this age of the world, pity those "clergymen and others," without whose post-office orders and almost illegibly-signed cheques promoters and Limited Liability Companies would soon have to die a death of sheer inanition, and leave the commercial field open for honest labour — for legitimate competition.

When a tradesman exposes his flannels, and cotton prints, and stout calicos on the pavement, a magistrate is reluctant to convict even the practised thief who walks off with a convenient dress-length secreted

under her shawl; and, in like manner, when at this time of the world, in spite of newspaper exposures, notwithstanding warning "leaders" and magazine articles, and the advice of those whose advice is really worth following, people will risk their money in speculative ventures, shall we be sorry for them? shall we, like Mr. Raidsford, sing a doleful lamentation over the mites of widows, and the tithes of clergymen; over the savings of governesses and the rents of country gentlemen; nay, rather shall we not say with Mr. Stewart, the mouse is the cat's legitimate prey, let promoters devour that substance which is theirs by right.

There is an old saying, that a man is justified in doing what he likes with his own; and, if a dupe be the personal property of a rogue, why should the rogue not fleece him, even though such a proceeding be disagreeable to the dupe?

In business, the millionaire and the curate alike must take his chance, only the curate is never willing to do so; he never bears his pain in such dignified silence as was the case with Compton Raidsford, who, week after week, found that "pressure for money" of which he had spoken to Arthur Dudley, increase so much, that eventually he began to tremble for Moorlands — to believe that the business he had worked so hard to establish was tottering, and that, before long, he should have to place his books in the hands of Messrs. Byrne, Browne, Byrne, and Company, accountants, Old Jewry.

He could not understand it. Never in all his experience before had money been so difficult to get in — so necessary to pay. Houses that formerly would

have trusted him to any amount now absolutely refused to draw upon him at four months. Cash with order was requested in some cases; and although, at first, Mr. Raidsford had treated such refusals and demands as mere signs of the times, he came before very long to the conclusion that somehow his credit had got damaged — that there was more than accident in the pecuniary pressure which ultimately threatened to crush him to the earth.

In his distress he had no other confidant than Lord Kemms — to no business man dare he have confided his difficulties.

"I am perfectly solvent," he repeated over and over again. "My estate ought to pay 60*s.* in the pound any day; and yet now, if you believe me, my Lord, I find a difficulty in getting even a bill discounted. If I could only trace the origin of this universal distrust, I really should not despair; but as it is, I feel I am fighting in the dark. That there is something being urged against me I am satisfied, but what that something may be I cannot conjecture. I have not speculated; I have not taken any unprofitable contracts. I have sedulously steered clear of railways for the last two years. Even that branch which is proposed from South Kemms to Palinsbridge, I have refused to touch. I wonder if I can have been too cautious — if my prudence have been misconstrued!"

Lord Kemms did not know, but professed himself willing to lend Mr. Raidsford whatever amount of money he might at the moment have at his bankers, which offer the contractor declined.

"I do not think, my Lord," he said, "you know

exactly into what sums our transactions run. No amount of money almost could compensate me for the loss of credit. If things go on for another month as they have doue for the last three, I shall have to call a meeting. There is no use blinding oneself in a case of this kind."

No use, indeed, when one half the City was already talking of Mr. Raidsford's suspension as imminent — when he was spoken of on 'Change as shaky, and words of wisdom were uttered in dingy back offices concerning the fall of the great contractor.

It was while things were in this state, both with the Protector, Limited, and Compton Raidsford, Unlimited, that one night, by the last post, Arthur Dudley received a letter, which at the first glance utterly astounded him. It was directed in Mr. Black's hand to Arthur Dudley, Esquire; but the enclosure, in feigned writing, was addressed to Messrs. Shields and Montgomery, Solar Foundry, Wolverhampton.

Arthur had mastered the contents of this communication before he comprehended it could not be intended for him. He ran his eye over the few lines it contained hastily, and then examined the envelope; after that he read the letter again, and then, placing letter and envelope together, compared both at his leisure.

"What a d— shame!" he at length broke out; and he rose straight away, and taking his hat walked forth into the night. He had the letter in his pocket-book, and he strode on like a man who distrusted the strength of his own resolution if he stood still and deliberated about the thing he was resolved to do.

Along Great Queen Street and Long Acre he pro-

ceeded rapidly. Taking the most direct routes he soon reached Regent Street, which he crossed; thence making his way to Bond Street, he commenced threading through the maze of squares that lie in that part of London till he came to the "Place" in which Mr. Raidsford's town house was situated.

He had chosen a most unseasonable hour at which to pay a visit; but Arthur knew that if Mr. Raidsford were at home he should gain admittance. Lights flamed out across the pavement; the house was illuminated as though for a royal marriage; carriages containing merchant princes, their wives and their daughters, were setting down as Mr. Dudley drew near the house.

This was not quite what Arthur had anticipated; but still he held to his resolution, and arrived at the door which Lord Kemms was entering at the moment.

"My Lord," he said; and at the words his former neighbour turned and recognised him.

"You here, Dudley?" he exclaimed. "This is an unexpected pleasure. Shall we go on? we are stopping the way."

"I am not a guest," Arthur answered; "but I want to see Mr. Raidsford particularly. I can wait until he is at leisure, but I must see him. Will you manage this for me?" he added, entreatingly, feeling, perhaps, that in his walking-dress amongst all that gay company he should stand but a poor chance of inducing any servant to carry his message. Good-natured as ever, Lord Kemms readily consented to do what was required.

"No bad news, I trust," he whispered, as one of the servants, in compliance with his request, was show-

ing Arthur to the library, there to wait Mr. Raidsford's advent.

"Not bad news, I hope," Arthur answered; "but, still, news he ought to hear at once."

"I will tell him," Lord Kemms said, and closing the library door he left the secretary marvelling whether such an entertainment could be considered a sign of impending ruin — of pecuniary difficulty.

There had been a time when Arthur would have decided this question in the negative; but he was wiser now, and knew that in London people feast on the very brink of commercial death, that they gather their friends and give elegant *déjeûners*, and eat with an appetite and enjoy their repast, even though they know next hour Jack Ketch is coming to arrange the noose and hang them by the neck till all chance of return to respectable West-end society is past for ever.

To his country imagination, it was still a fearful and a wonderful thing to see people spending, with poverty stalking gauntly at the heels of pleasure; but he had acquired sufficient knowledge of town to be at the same time aware three or four hundred pounds seem a mere bagatelle to a man whose liabilities amount to hundreds of thousands.

With affairs going all cross in the City, Mrs. Raidsford, triumphant in satins and jewellery, was "at home" in Huntingdon Place.

If another chance were never to offer itself of airing her bad grammar, and exhibiting her wonderful taste in dress to her rich and grand acquaintances, that was all the more reason why she should avail herself of this opportunity, while opportunity lasted. Only stupid, unsophisticated people like the Dudleys thought of

retrenchment before the final crash; besides, Mrs. Raidsford meant to marry her daughters off, if she could, and all the world knows the best way to secure a desirable husband is to ask a few hundred people to meet and make themselves as uncomfortable as circumstances and the construction of modern London houses will permit.

All this and much more to the same effect Arthur Dudley had abundant leisure for considering before the door opened and Mr. Raidsford appeared.

He made some hurried apology for his delay, and then throwing himself into a chair opposite Arthur, anxiously demanded his business.

Amongst his guests in the drawing-rooms, on the staircase, in the hall, he had been a prosperous-looking, smiling gentleman; now he flung the mask off, and allowed the lines of care to appear in his face, a tone of despairing trouble to lurk in his voice.

"Don't be afraid, man," he said, almost brusquely. "Lord Kemms told me your business concerned me; out with it; I am not a child — I can face the worst — I have seen it coming this many a day."

"Mr. Raidsford," began Arthur, "what you have suffered from has been a loss of credit, I understand; a pressure, as you yourself told me, for money."

"Yes," was the reply; "and when this pressure commenced, I believed my credit to be as good as that of any man in England; I believed it to be so good, in fact, that I paid no attention to the pressure for a considerable period — not, in fact, until it became almost like a run on a bank."

"And to what cause did you attribute that run?" inquired Arthur.

"I have never been able to attribute it to any cause," was the reply; "I had no heavy losses; I was engaged in no great ventures; I was perfectly solvent; I am solvent, in fact, now; but still I know I must stop; I have fought as long as fighting seems of any use; now I must adopt another plan."

"If you were aware of the cause of your loss of credit, would it help you to battle through?" asked Arthur.

"That would depend entirely on the cause," was the reply.

"Supposing it were private malice," Arthur suggested; "suppose an enemy to have been at work."

"I have not an enemy in the world," Mr. Raidsford answered.

"If you read that, perhaps you will alter your opinion," Arthur remarked, handing him the letter he had received. "Mr. Raidsford, I could not rest till I had come to you; I feared my own purpose might undergo a change before morning. I knew it was right you should be told this thing, and yet I hesitated about showing a letter which strictly is none of my property. I shall speak to Black about what I have done; you know now who has been your enemy, and I trust it may not be too late for you to repair the mischief he has caused."

And with that Arthur left the room, and wended his way back to Lincoln's Inn Fields. He had never liked Mr. Raidsford, and he could not be very cordial to him, even at the moment when he was stretching out his hand to save the contractor from ruin.

He had not done him this service out of good-will, but because right was right, and justice justice. He

had hasted to serve this man, whom he always regarded with jealousy and distrust; but it was not in Arthur's nature to feel other than bitterly the fact, that while he was able to serve Mr. Raidsford he was unable to extricate himself; that though Moorlands might be preserved, still Berrie Down was heavily mortgaged.

The very step he had taken, moreover, would, he knew, make his own position more difficult. With Mr. Black for an enemy, what troubles might he not expect to have to face in the future — what about his bills, what about Berrie Down, what about his means of actual subsistence? If a man could, secretly and anonymously, damage another's credit, plot and scheme to beggar a person against whom he had a grudge, watch the growth of his plans through months, and never flinch nor falter in the execution of his purpose, what might Arthur not expect at his hands, after having baulked him in his design?

All that night Squire Dudley lay awake, thinking in what words he should tell Mr. Black he had found him out, exposed his scheme, and defeated his carefully-prepared plot.

He knew exactly how the accident, which put him in possession of Mr. Black's secret, had occurred; and he was well aware, in due time, the letter intended for him would be returned by Messrs. Shields and Montgomery to Dowgate Hill; but he resolved not to wait for that *dénouement* — instead of doing so, he started next morning, directly after breakfast, for the City, where Mr. Black received him with his usual easy flow of language.

"Well, and how is the 'Protector?'" was his greeting; "anything new? I think things were a

shade better on the market yesterday, and I have some applications this morning from parsons about shares in the 'Universal.' Discount is down a half, too. By-the-bye, you got my letter, I suppose? There is no help for it, Dudley, we must renew those confounded bills again. You noticed what I said about knowing a fellow willing to do them?"

"I did not," answered Arthur, "for the simple reason that I suppose the letter you meant to send to me is now at Wolverhampton."

"What the devil do you mean?"

There was no sham about Mr. Black's tone or manner as he put this question. For the first time, perhaps, during all the years he had known him, Arthur beheld the actual man, and the actual man was not pleasant to behold.

"Messrs. Shields and Montgomery's letter came in my envelope," the secretary explained.

"Indeed! And what have you done with that letter?"

"I took it last night to Mr. Raidsford."

For a moment Arthur thought his kinsman was going to strike him. Mr. Black made a step forward towards his visitor, and lifted his clenched hand, but next instant he let it drop heavily on the table while he asked —

"Pray, Mister Squire Dudley, was that your idea of honour?"

"Yes, Mr. Black, it was, strictly," Arthur replied.

"And how much did he give you for the information? — come now, be frank. I would have outbid him, had you played your cards well. What was the figure? Did you go cheap? I'll be sworn you did.

I'll bet ten to one you sold yourself as well as me. Oh! you won't answer — you are sulky. You are going to deprive me of the pleasure of your honourable, and gentlemanly, and intellectual society! Curse you!" added the promoter, suddenly changing his sneering tone for one of the intensest fury, "curse you, for a skulking, sneaking, timid fool, who has not even sense enough to enjoy seeing a man who ruined us ruined likewise! I'll be even with you yet. I'll make you rue the day you meddled in my concerns, and spoiled my game. Do you hear me, Dudley?" he shouted across the outer office; "look to yourself!"

"I intend," was Arthur Dudley's reply, as he walked into the street, knowing he was a ruined man.

He did not return to Lincoln's Inn Fields for some hours — not, in fact, until after he had seen a solicitor, and laid the exact state of his affairs before that gentleman.

Now the worst had come, he felt equal to face it. He felt it was better to know the extent of his liabilities, and to take immediate measures for breaking off all dealings with the man who had led him so terribly astray.

For every scrap of paper to which he had ever attached his name, he was liable. His shares, he knew, were not worth sixpence; the whole of his property would barely suffice to pay his debts; Berrie Down must go, and also the house in Lincoln's Inn Fields. This was the end of the dreamer's vision — this was the fortune he had come to London to seek! Beggary!

His salary depended on the life of the "Protector," and that was scarcely expected to survive from day to

day. Heather would have to be told now — Heather, whose love he had grown to value too late — Heather, whom he had thrust from him that night when she knelt beside his chair, pleading to be unto him an helpmeet! Would she reproach him — would she ask if he had married her to bring her to this? No! — he knew she never could be so unlike the sweet Heather of old as to taunt him with his misfortunes; but would she be cold; would she be hard and unsympathetic; would she merely bear and leave him to bear also? If he only could have been sure of her, Arthur, walking about the lanes and alleys of the City, thought he should not have cared so much!

He had despised the crutch in his days of strength and independence; and now, when he was lame, he stretched forth his hand to touch some support in vain.

When late in the afternoon he reached Lincoln's Inn, he found Mr. Stewart, Mr. Harcourt, and two strangers in the office.

At a glance he knew something disagreeable had happened, and, before five minutes were over, he was informed the cashier, recommended by Mr. Stewart himself, had been embezzling the moneys of the Company; that he, Mr. Black and Mr. Robert Crossenham, and Mr. Bayley Crossenham, the latter trading under the firm of "Stack and Son, Corn Factors, Mark Lane," had all been playing into each other's hands, buying wheat which never was delivered, and dividing the proceeds.

"We want to look at the register, if you please, Mr. Dudley," said Mr. Stewart, with a terrible politeness.

"There," he remarked, turning to Mr. Harcourt,

when Arthur had produced the book required, "it is as I thought; and now we shall not have even the poor satisfaction of transporting him. Mr. Dudley, I should have thought that *even you* might have concluded there was something wrong when a clerk bought shares in a sinking concern;" and, with this remark, which was so much Hebrew to Arthur, Mr. Stewart said, "good evening," and went off with the strangers he had brought with him.

"What is it all about?" Arthur asked of Mr. Harcourt, when they were left alone.

"There has been wholesale robbery," was the reply, "and the Company will have to be wound up."

"And why can they not prosecute Graham?"

"Because, being a shareholder, he is a partner, and a man cannot legally embezzle his own property. It is a bad business, a very bad business!" added Mr. Harcourt. "I am afraid Mr. Black is a thorough-paced scoundrel."

"I know he is," said Arthur; but the fact of his knowledge did not make matters any the better for him or for the Protector.

After the clerks were gone, and Mr. Harcourt had departed, Arthur still sate alone in his office, looking his misery in the face. Twice Tifford had been good enough to inform the secretary that dinner was ready; Arthur took no notice of the summons.

How to go upstairs and see Heather — how to tell her the game was over, and that it had left him a beggar, he could not imagine. What were his dreamings in the old days, speeding down to Palinsbridge, and planning to communicate the fact of a thousand a-year being added to their income, to this!

Coldness and doubt had not visited Heather; Mrs. Croft had not aroused her jealousy; Lally was still with her, and he had not then neglected his child. Poor Lally, poor little Lally! The man's heart must have been very heavy that night, for, sitting in the firelight, the tears dropped down from his eyes, one by one, as he sat thinking of his living wife and his dead child.

If only the past could come back again, how differently he would act! if only Heather would be to him the wife of old, he might still make a struggle and conquer Fortune yet.

Twice that day Arthur had found his level; had seen in what estimation people held his talents; and, in the years gone by, he had estranged from him the woman who believed him perfect — who was unto him, in the old, happy time at Berrie Down, though he recked not then of his blessing, more than silver or gold, Far above Rubies.

"While he was thinking, Heather herself opened the door, and glided up to where he sat. For weeks previously she had been trying to draw nearer to her husband, seeking for an opportunity to pray for "forgiveness," Lord help her, "for her selfish sorrow;" and now, in the firelight, she came and laying her hand on his shoulder, said, —

"Is anything the matter, Arthur? Are you ill? are you vexed? I have sent Tifford twice to tell you dinner is ready."

"I do not want any dinner," he answered. "I have had meals enough for one day — meals enough to destroy any man's appetite. The 'Protector' is going

to be wound up, Heather, and my salary will be stopped, of course."

She hesitated for a moment before replying, then she said, "I am very sorry for your sake, dear, for you hoped to make so much out of it. We must return to the Hollow, I suppose."

"I must sell the Hollow," he answered; and then, in a few hurried sentences, he told her all — his folly, his credulity, his hopes, his ruin.

He kept nothing back; and when he had quite finished, when there was nothing more to add to the dreary recital of loss and misfortune, he paused, listening for what she should say, for how she should receive his confession.

For a moment there was silence — a silence so great that the falling of the cinders on to the hearth alone broke the stillness.

"Will she reproach me," he wondered; "will she be angry at best? will she say nothing, and refuse pity to me, though she can give it to every other created being?"

"Have you not a word to speak to me, Heather?" he asked at last; and then the tears she had been striving to keep back burst forth, and flinging her arms around his neck, she sobbed out, —

"Oh, my love, my love!" and as she lay on his breast Arthur understood that he was to her, in that hour of bitter distress, dearer than the lover of her girlhood, than the husband of her youth.

CHAPTER XVII.

Forgotten.

The "Protector" had been dead for two years. Its very name was a memory. Lawyers who had assisted in holding a legal inquest over its remains — directors who had been badgered to death concerning its failure — people who had lost money or made money by it, recollected that there had once been such a Company; but the grass was growing green above its grave — in law courts and the Stock Exchange. So many similar ventures had lived, and prospered, and died in the time, that its history had become an old, old tale, which was never now repeated save here and there by one who had lost money through it.

Summer was come once again, and in the close streets round about Bethnal Green and Spitalfields the hot sultry air which met any adventurous explorer who bravely pursued his way into those almost unknown regions, seemed like the breath issuing from the mouth of some sulphurous pestilent volcano. The thousand and one smells of the East of London assailed his nostrils, the sights and sounds of that most wretched locality offended his eyes and ears.

Few people who were not called thither by business or necessity jostled the rightful inhabitants in the streets; but it is to the east of Bishopsgate Street Without I must, nevertheless, with all due apology for even hinting at the existence of such a neighbourhood, conduct my reader — to Silk Street, so named, no

doubt, in olden times, on account of the number of silk-weavers who abode there.

It had once been a thoroughfare of no small importance; but its glory had faded, its trade fallen away, although the railway waggons thundered through it, and the noise of passing carts and cabs never stopped, never from morning till night. It was a mean, poor street, composed principally of dilapidated-looking three-storey houses, in the windows of which were exhibited here fruit and vegetables, there drapery goods, and again furniture of the stalest, poorest, commonest description. Towards the end of the thoroughfare, however, there were erected some new warehouses and stores.

Contrasting gloomily with their bright red-brick fronts was the gateway which gave ingress to Mr. Lukin's silk-weaving factory.

A gloomy, disreputable gateway, affording admittance up a narrow cart-road into a wider court-yard beyond, one side of which was occupied by a packing-shed and a carpenter's shop; another by the weaving-factory, and a third by the dwelling of the manager; the only picturesque things about the place being the windlass and buckets belonging to a disused well.

We must pass in, if you please, for Arthur Dudley is the manager, and this is his house.

There are high walls all round the court-yard; high walls blackened with smoke, unrelieved by tree, or ivy, or climbing Virginian creeper.

Heather is planning to cover them with greenery, but her attempts have hitherto proved abortive; the shrubs all die like the plants in her ghostly, little

garden, where she can get nothing but double red daisies and stocks and pinks to grow.

A change this from Berrie Down, you say! Certainly; but life is full of changes, and Arthur Dudley has still much to learn.

The world's educational establishment are not always pleasant places at which to reside; the play-grounds are oftentimes contracted, and the diet not suited to delicate palates; but the lessons taught in those seminaries of practical learning prove often-times much more useful than the pleasant tasks conned beside the singing river, under the rustling trees.

As for Heather, there is no life perfect; yet it may be doubted whether she was very unhappy in those days of pecuniary struggle, of pinching economy. The high walls which seemed to be closing her in were, perhaps, the most active trouble of her life. Sometimes she felt as if she were in a prison, as if she were a thousand miles from every one, as if she should die for want of air, as though, if a fire were to break out, she should never reach the gates alive.

At all of which fancies Arthur laughed, and then Heather laughed; and then the two, in the summer evenings, would water their tiny bit of garden-ground, and talk about the far-away country, which it almost seemed as though they were never to behold again.

Entirely owing to Arthur's pride. Heather could not blind herself to this fact, although she sedulously refrained from touching upon it.

When Berrie Down was sold, the gentleman who bought it offered Arthur two hundred and fifty pounds a year and a free house, if he would take the management of the farm, but Arthur refused.

There was a situation open for him, he said, of five hundred a year in London, and he would never be servant where he had been master; so the proprietor took "no" for an answer, and passing on to Alick secured his services for one-half the sum and the use of Berrie Down House and farm produce, till such time as the proprietor should require the residence from him. Two of the girls resided with the young steward, but Agnes remained with Heather; Cuthbert had left the Messrs. Elser, and was now receiving a good salary from Mr. Raidsford. Altogether the family prospects were brighter than of old, excepting as regarded Arthur, who had steadily fallen from height to height, till at length he found himself cashier and bookkeeper, and yardkeeper and general manager to Mr. Lukin, who had great works in the North, and was reported to be enormously rich.

If he were so, Arthur did not derive much benefit from his wealth, for he had but two hundred a year; while Simons, the actual though sub-manager, thought himself fortunate to receive two pounds a week.

Certainly Arthur's duties were light — to take money and pay it into the bank — to write a report of how business progressed to his employer — to keep the books, and see to things generally. There was no great hardship or difficulty involved in these and such like matters; and yet Arthur was now as of old at Berrie Down, a wretched man.

He had a trouble dogging his footsteps, and that trouble was debt. After paying off the most of his liabilities, and leaving himself without a sixpence in the world, he was still five hundred pound deficient,

and five hundred pounds to a man who is trying to live respectably on two hundred a year is, with a pressing creditor, almost equivalent to utter bankruptcy.

His friends would have helped him had they known of his grievous strait; but Arthur's was not a temper to take help or pecuniary assistance from any one on earth. With all his heart, Mr. Raidsford desired to show his gratitude to the man who had saved him from ruin; but when he came to press offers of money, offers of situations, high salaries, and so forth, on Arthur's acceptance, the poor gentleman drew himself up, and made the contractor feel he had made a mistake — that Arthur Dudley of Silk Street very much resembled Arthur Dudley of Berrie Down, only that he was a degree prouder than of old.

Mr. Croft, also, more earnestly desired to do something for his friend; but he was repelled haughtily by Arthur, and also, though more gently, by Heather.

As for Mr. Black, in answer to the solicitor who, on Arthur's behalf, waited on him concerning those bills for which Squire Dudley was legally liable, he said plainly, he never would find sixpence towards helping Dudley out of the mess into which he had got himself.

"If he had stuck to me, I should have stuck to him," the promoter answered; "but he would go fishing on his own hook, and if he have come to grief, he has nobody to blame but himself."

Mrs. Ormson and the Marsdens, of course, ignored the very existence of such people as the Dudleys; and, when they were unhappily mentioned, laid the blame of all Arthur's misfortunes at the door of the

"woman he married." As for Miss Hope, from foreign parts, she was sympathetic, but necessarily vague. She did not know in the least how low her nephew had fallen, but hoped, she said, on her return to England, to visit them in their little house, which, spite of all Heather told her concerning its limited accommodation, she had no doubt would be charming, "dear Heather having such a taste in arrangement."

In brief, from all their old haunts, from all their old acquaintances, from all their pursuits, and thoughts, and ideas, the Dudleys had vanished away.

From the former life they had fallen. As a stone drops into the river's depths, so they had sunk to that wretched east-end street, and in the circles in which they once mixed, they were forgotten as a dead man out of mind.

The old servants, too, were gone; they were unable to afford to keep any save Priscilla, and she after a long illness had come back almost from death to serve her former mistress — never to leave her, she declared to Bessie, who went to see her in the hospital — never to leave her more.

"I always said to Mrs. Piggott, Miss Bessie, I hoped I should die before crinoline went out of fashion, and when there was a talk of them going to be left off, I fell sick; but now I hear it was all nonsense, so I mean to get better, if it was only for the sake of Mrs. Dudley, who says she misses me, Miss Bessie — misses me!"

As for Bessie, she too, unable to remain away from her old friend, had returned from the country farm-house, and taken up her abode in a street not very far away from that where Heather lived. She was a good

and tasteful needlewoman, and earned a tolerable livelihood with her white, pretty fingers.

Many an hour she and Heather spent together while Arthur was busy; but Arthur was not taken into the secret. Even Heather doubted his discretion in the matter, and there were ample reasons why the girl's whereabouts should be known to as few persons as possible.

Ned and Mrs. Piggott were married and settled in a public-house on the road to South Kemms, where, Alick informed Heather, they did a capital business, and kept a most regular and respectable tavern. "It is quite a little hotel, mother," said the young man, adding, "When shall I be able to persuade you to come down to the Hollow and see how lovely the place looks?" but, in reply, Heather shook her head.

"Naturally, the very name of Berrie Down is painful to Arthur," she answered. "I should like to please you, Alick, but I cannot bear to vex him. His life has been a very hard one, and I ought not to make it any harder."

Then Alick had another project; he would take a house at the sea-side for a month, and Heather, and the girls, and Leonard should all go down and stay there, and he, and Arthur, and Cuthbert would spend their Sundays with them. "It will be like the old times, for us all to be together again," finished the youth; "and, dear Heather, I do want to see you looking a little better;" whereupon she called him a foolish boy, and, drawing his face down to hers, kissed it, saying, "people could be well and happy anywhere, in London as in the country, if they would only try to be thankful and contented."

But the "foolish boy" resolutely refusing to be either contented or thankful, unless she would agree to his plan, at length, when it was far on in the summer, "between the crops" as he put it, Alick persuaded Heather to make her preparations for leaving home, which she did all the more readily, perhaps, because Arthur agreed to come down on the Saturday nights, and remain with them until the Monday mornings.

"I think the change will do us all good," he said; but there was a look in his face which Heather somehow mistrusted, and which caused her to wonder what could be the matter with Arthur; whether he had any fresh trouble he was keeping from her, or whether he felt ill and would not say so, for fear of spoiling her holiday.

Talking the matter over with Bessie, however, that young person combated her friend's fears successfully. "If Arthur should be ill," she said, "I shall certainly hear of it from Morrison" (Morrison was one of the workmen somewhat devoted to Priscilla, in whom both Heather and Bessie trusted, and it is only fair to add, he deserved such trust, for the notes they mutually exchanged were never chattered about; the name of the young lady, whom Mrs. Dudley went to see, was never mentioned to any one); "and if I do hear of there being anything the matter," went on Bessie, "I shall certainly go round to nurse him, and telegraph for you; so make yourself happy concerning that dear husband, and pack up your clothes at once."

Which advice Heather followed in a divided frame of mind; divided, because while she longed to see the country, she hated leaving Arthur, who, on the very Saturday of her departure, said he should not be able

to accompany her out of town that week, because Mr. Lukin was coming to London, and might be expected in Silk Street at any moment.

"But you must go, dear," he added, "and I will run down through the week, if I possibly can. Come now, get your bonnet on, or we shall be too late at Waterloo;" and thus he hurried her on till they were fairly in a cab, *en route* to the South Western Railway Terminus.

There were Alick and Cuthbert, Lucy and Laura, all looking as bright and sunshiny as the weather.

"Not coming, Arthur!" exclaimed his brother; "what a shabby trick! I could not have believed you would have served a fellow so!"

"It is not my fault, Alick," was the reply; "but Mr. Lukin is coming to town, and I must be on the spot to receive him; you will take care of Heather, Alick," he added, in a lower and a different tone, drawing his brother aside; "you will promise me to take care of her?"

"Take care of Heather!" answered Alick, "I like that; as though I should not take care of her. Do you think I forget, Arthur — do you imagine I could possibly forget, the years during which she was our mother — the best mother ever any boys and girls found?"

"Thank you, I shall be easier now," Arthur answered; and then he joined the others and kept near his wife till it was time for the little party to enter the compartment, which they quite filled. To the last, Squire Dudley never took his eyes off his wife's face; and, when the moment of final parting came, he kissed

her two or three times over, saying "God bless you, Heather! think of me sometimes."

When the train moved off, he stood on the platform, looking after the carriage which contained his wife; and as the speed increased, Heather saw a look come over his countenance which filled her with so terrible an alarm, that she cried out in a moment, "Alick, I must go back to Arthur! there is something the matter! I ought never to have come!"

All in vain, they tried to combat her determination; at the first station where the express stopped, Heather alighted, resolved to return to town. She would not hear of Alick travelling with her. "No," she said; "if he be in any trouble, I shall be better to remain alone with him; if not, I will go down to you by the first train on Monday morning. I promise, Alick, faithfully! Do not try to prevent my going home," she pleaded; "remember, once before I wanted to turn back, and Arthur would not let me!"

Which last argument, proving unanswerable, with heavy hearts they allowed her to have her own way, and she went into the waiting-room, where she stopped for an hour, until the up-express appeared in sight, when she took her seat, together with some other passengers, and was soon tearing back to London, under the glare of the afternoon sun. At the terminus she took a cab for Norton Folgate, from whence she walked on to Silk Street. She had no need to ring the bell, for one of the men coming out at the moment, afforded her entrance, without attracting, in any way, attention to her return.

"I fear I have done a very foolish thing," she thought, as she stepped inside the gateway, and any

one else might have thought the same, for Arthur had complained of neither ache nor pain; he had been in good spirits all the morning; he had faithfully promised to come down through the week; and, but for that expression of hopeless, helpless, blank despair in his face as the train swept out of the station, Heather would have gone away happy, and Arthur's fate proved different.

As it was, he had traversed the road back from Waterloo a miserable and a wretched man.

He had brought much grief to Heather, he would bring no more. He had been tempted, and he had fallen; he had been pressed for money, and he had "borrowed" — that was the way he put it to himself — a few hundreds from Mr. Lukin, and he had vainly striven to replace those hundreds, and now Mr. Lukin was coming to inspect the books, and a worse thing than poverty — disgrace! was without in the street, waiting to cross their threshold.

But Heather should never know this; no man, nor no woman, should ever say a Dudley of Berrie Down had committed a felony. There was one way of escape, and his feeble mind clutched hold of that poor straw eagerly: one way — he would take care of himself, and Alick would take care of Heather!

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Bitterness of Death.

Once inside the house, Heather, all in a flutter, ran up to her own room, and asked herself why she had returned. Even now — even with the consciousness on her that she had done a very foolish thing, at which Arthur would be naturally vexed — she felt she could not have gone on; that the journey, with that awful dread weighing her down, would have been one of pain instead of pleasure; that it would be far more a holiday to her — far and away more, to stay behind with her husband — her poor, careworn, miserable husband — than to travel through the loveliest scenery on earth.

She had told Alick it was a feeling, a foolish though uncontrollable feeling, which made her turn back; but she would have spoken more correctly had she said it was the love of her heart — that love which is stronger than death, more constant than sorrow.

Yet she knew she never could make Arthur understand this; knew she never could hope to impress upon him how miserable she had felt after the farewell at the station; how utterly impossible it was for her to go on and be happy, while he remained behind alone.

How should she tell him? With a vague desire to break the fact of her return to others before facing her husband, she went downstairs again, and into the kitchen, meaning to tell Prissy, she feared Mr. Dudley would be lonely, and so returned, sending the rest of

the family on. She meant to have a comfortable chat with Prissy, for her heart was very full, and she longed to have a good talk with some one; but, when she entered the kitchen, no Prissy was there; no Prissy was in the back-kitchen either, nor in the washhouse, nor in the larder, nor in the coal-cellar, for even into that last hiding-place Heather peeped.

Then it suddenly occurred to Mrs. Dudley that there was a terrible look of order about the kitchen; about the pots and pans, the plates and dishes; everything was in its proper position; the chairs were ranged against the wall, the table had no crockery heaped upon it, there was not even a glass-cloth flung carelessly aside.

What could it mean? Heather stood considering this question, and all at once her heart gave a great leap; not of joy, but fear. There was no fire; the fact had not struck her at first — perhaps because she was then intent on looking for Prissy — now, however, it came home to her, not merely that there was no fire, but that the wood, paper, and coals, were laid ready for lighting; ready for lighting in both kitchens. A woman must, like Heather, be a practical housekeeper to understand the full significance of such a spectacle.

Both fires out; both laid ready for lighting; that bespoke premeditation.

Now, premeditation meant, not that Prissy had gone upstairs to dress, and forgotten her fires; not that Prissy had gone out shopping, and remained to gossip; not that Prissy had met her lover, who made time pass so pleasantly, that minutes and fuel were alike forgotten; but that Prissy had gone out with leave to do so granted, and that she had conscientiously waited

to put the house into apple-pie order before her departure.

One of Heather's greatest comforts, in leaving home, had been the idea that Prissy would see that her husband wanted for nothing; that she would be always on guard, always at hand to get him whatever he wanted.

Mrs. Dudley had arranged that Prissy's mother was to come up by the late train that night, and keep her company while the family were away; and the very last words she spoke, before leaving home, were, "Don't forget, Prissy, to write to me often; and if Mr. Dudley should be ill, I depend upon your sending for me;" in answer to which Prissy said, "I will see to everything, mum, as if you was at home; and I'll write every two days, and never be out of the house till you come back."

After that, to return and find the bird flown, was rather disheartening. Mrs. Dudley could not unravel the enigma, and she thereupon slowly ascended the stairs, wondering as she went what it all could mean.

She passed her own room, and wending her way up another flight of stairs, entered that belonging to Prissy. There, on the foot of the bed, hung the girl's cotton gown, her apron, and various other articles of apparel which Heather recognized at a glance as her every-day habiliments.

With an awful creeping dread upon her, Heather opened the door of the closet where Prissy hung up her gown, and found, not the girl's best dress, bonnet, and shawl, but empty pegs — a fearful vacancy.

What could it all mean? She looked again around the apartment, and perceived Prissy's box was gone.

Clearly, her trusty domestic had departed, not merely for the afternoon but for a longer period.

With a sense of suffocation on her, Heather walked to the small window which was partially open, and stood there wondering what she should do next.

The state of the house increased her difficulty as to the best means of explaining her return to Arthur. Supposing he had made any arrangement with which her presence would interfere; supposing it should seem as though she had come back to play the part of a spy, to be a torment instead of a blessing; what could he say, what was there he might not imagine?

That Prissy ever left the house of her own good will, Heather's understanding refused to credit; and why Arthur should have sent her away, Heather likewise could not comprehend.

If she had done anything wrong, and been discharged, she would have taken all her clothes; if she had not done anything wrong, why did Arthur let her go? Over this question, Heather, still with her bonnet on, stood puzzling; and, as she stood, she saw the men leave off work and don their coats, and pass out of the yard; at first, in gangs, afterwards in twos and threes — finally, one by one.

There they went — foremen, overlookers, clerks, sub-manager; finally, Arthur went down to the gate, talking to Morrison as they walked.

At the gate Morrison paused and seemed impressing something earnestly on Mr. Dudley, to which the latter listened with an appearance of interest. Then Arthur replied; and, at length satisfied, as it seemed, Morrison touched his hat, and passed through the gate, while Arthur looked after him. As he came up the yard,

Heather, from her post of observation, could see his face distinctly; that face which had struck her girlish fancy, but which was now so changed — so changed! oh, God!

As she looked at him, and remembered the first day they had ever set eyes on one another, the tears came welling up, and for a moment she could not see him because of the mist which blinded her.

Poor Arthur! Poor Arthur! In the after days it was a comfort to her to recollect that at that moment there came no thought of selfish pity into her mind for poor Heather. Poor Heather! changed and broken too.

If he had suffered, had not she? if he had borne, had not she? if he had found his cross almost heavier than he could endure, had not hers also bowed her to the very ground? had not she wept her tears, and fought with her anguish? Yea, truly; and yet Heather, looking at that pale, worn, haggard man, who came slowly lounging up the yard, thought of none of these things, but only of the blasted hopes, of the proud, disappointed, broken heart of the husband of her youth.

The sunlight, flaring down into the courtyard, shone full upon his face as he walked back from the entrance gates, swinging the great key on his forefinger; and Heather, sheltered from observation by the window-curtain, looked down on the man she had returned to comfort, not knowing exactly what to do — in what terms to announce her change of purpose.

The expression on his countenance, which had so struck her while the train moved out of the station, was on his countenance still. He was all alone, as he thought, now; with no need to put on a mask, with no necessity to smile, or speak, or deceive; and as Heather,

watching him, beheld that look of misery deepen and deepen, while he walked so slowly back, an awful dread took possession of her — a dread of something being about to happen which made her tremble as though in an ague-fit.

He was now beside the well — an old-fashioned one, with rope and windlass, up which the men had in former days drawn buckets of water, but now neglected and disused. It had long been covered over for fear of accidents, and though the boards had shrunk one from another with the heat of many summers, still the planking was secure enough to render all fear of accident unnecessary.

Beside this well, Arthur now paused for a moment, apparently irresolute; then he stooped, and through the stillness the sound of a splash, of something falling down, and then touching water, ascended to where Heather stood.

At that moment she could not have moved had it been to save her life; but she could watch, and she did, to see Arthur rise with a face from which even despair was blotted out; for despair implies a certain ability left to wrestle against, or, at all events, to feel utter hopelessness; but now, the sun looked down upon a man who had passed even that stage, who had gone through his last struggle, cast his last die.

It was with the expression of a person already dead, Arthur turned from the well and walked across the courtyard, with the key no longer swinging on his forefinger.

What could he be intending to do? Heather dropped on her knees beside the window, and watched him enter the carpenter's shop. She dared not have met him then.

There came upon her such an access of terror when she heard that key splash into the water, as swept everything else out of her heart for the time being, save the most unconquerable, abject fear — a fear which prevented her even thinking, which took away the power of putting two and two together, and conceiving what project it might be Arthur had in hand.

She was like one in a dream — with a great horror on her, she fell on her knees and watched. Through it all, there was a vague, night-mare kind of consciousness that she and Arthur were locked up alone together — that escape for either of them was not possible — that if help were needed, help was now unattainable.

In her despair she prayed — holding on by the window-sill as if she were going to be torn from it, she framed some sort of petition to God to help her. Wearied and exhausted, frightened, and with that awful, vague, nameless dread at length taking a tangible form, it seemed to her as though, for a moment, everything faded from her eyes — as though, even while her lips were moving and her heart uttering some terrified words of supplication, her senses left her for a moment — the yard swam round, the buildings went up and down before her sight, the sunlight turned to darkness, and then —

Then, as if, after having been swung out into space for an immeasurable distance, she came back to the same point again — and the mist melted away, and the light was clear once more; and with a keen vision, though still with a giddy and confused feeling in her head, Heather beheld Arthur coming out of the carpenter's shop, dragging a bag of shavings after him, which

he shot out into one of the lower floors of the silk factory.

Still she watched him. He piled shavings, sackful after sackful, among the bales of raw silk — he carried the old wrapperings and more shavings into the counting-house — she saw him bring jars of oil and turpentine and empty them on the heap he had already collected.

"He has gone mad," she decided, rising up; "he has gone mad, and he is going to set the place on fire; and we cannot get out, and there is no help to be had."

None, for they were locked in. She dared not go downstairs and beat at the gates, for she felt more afraid now of encountering Arthur than even of remaining where she was.

Oh! those cruel walls, those dead, eyeless, earless walls, to which she might scream herself hoarse in vain — this solitude in the midst of numbers — this helplessness, with help within a few feet of her — this prison without a gaoler — this cage in which they were both about to be burned to death.

Well enough she knew that if once the factory caught fire, no living creature could long breathe within that confined space. It would be like trying to exist in a brick oven with a furnace alight at the one end. Already she seemed to feel the hot tongues of flame licking her cheek — already the struggle for life, dear life, appeared to have begun — already the scorching heat was drying up her blood — already she was beating against the closed gates, beating with her clenched hands till they were bruised and bleeding, while the fire raged behind, and the air became hotter and hotter, the flames fiercer and fiercer.

Already the horror she had often felt of fire in that enclosed place seemed to have become a tangible reality; and, with a low cry, Heather rushed from the room, and down the staircase.

A moment before Arthur had come back across the yard, instinctively she felt for matches. Another second and it would be too late; all fear of meeting him was gone; all fear, save the dread of an awful death for both; and so she flew down the stairs and met him as he came out of his own apartment, with a box of vestas in his hand.

She need not have feared meeting him; all the dread she had felt was as nothing compared to the terror which came into his face at sight of his wife. They had changed places now, and it was she, not he, who was strong and mad; in her frenzy, she struck the box out of his hand, and it fell over the banisters, the matches scattering on the floor-cloth below. Then she threw herself upon him, and asked if he knew what it was he had been about to do. With passionate sobs she prayed him to stay his hand, and to spare them both. Scarcely knowing what she said, she asked what could have tempted him to such a deed; if he were insane to think of committing so great a sin. With her arms twined around him, and her words flowing fast and unpremeditated, she poured out all her dread, her trouble, her horror, in a few hurried sentences.

She might as well have spared her remonstrances and her entreaties. From the moment he beheld his wife, all hope of escape, honourable escape, even by death, from the position in which he had placed himself, vanished. He had laid his plans so well, as he thought; and behold, in a moment, her love overthrew

them all! While she, clinging to him, went on praying and pleading, weeping and sobbing, all this passed through the man's mind. For the time, he had been stunned, cowed, as though he had met a phantom; but now, pushing her from him, with a sudden force which made her stagger and reel, he disengaged himself from her, and backing into the room he had just left, locked and bolted the door behind him.

"Arthur!" she cried; but there came no answer. "Arthur!" she only heard him walking across the floor.

"Arthur!" she shook the handle, and put her knee against the panel.

"Arthur! for God's sake open the door, and let me speak to you!" still no reply.

Would he drop out by the window, and so escape and finish the work he had begun? She ran downstairs and out of the house; but the sash was not lifted. Would he try to fire the place from within? She returned to the door, and beat against it, crying, "only a word, dear; only one word."

And in reply there came something which sounded like a gurgle and a sob, followed by a heavy fall, which seemed to shake the house to its very foundation.

"Arthur:" — there was dead silence. "Arthur!" there was not even a breath in answer; nothing but silence — a silence which might be felt.

She knelt down and tried to look through the keyhole, but could distinguish nothing. As she rose, she chanced to look down at her light muslin dress, and saw that there was blood upon it — blood oozing under the door, trickling in a narrow stream out upon the landing.

She ran back the whole width of the lobby, and flung herself against the door; but of what avail was her poor strength? Then she rushed out upon the roof of the house, with a vague intention of pulling up the ladder after her, and fleeing over other roofs for help and succour; but the inexorable walls rose high above; — there were no means of escape, no chance of assistance.

Then she sped down the stairs once more — down the stairs and past the landing where there was already a dark pool of blood forming outside the door. She crossed the yard to the carpenter's shop, and, seizing a hammer, ran to the outer gates, and struck blow after blow, striving to break the lock; she called and cried, but the people sweeping by never heard her, for the noise of passing conveyances deadened a voice already hoarse with excitement, exhausted with fear. She beat against the solid wood, and her blows were but woman's blows, faint, and feeble, and weak; she screamed for help, but there was no one to hear.

In her anguish, in that awful extremity of her life, she looked once again round the yard; and, as she did so, her eye fell on the factory bell, which hung suspended on the highest point of the building.

That was her last hope; desperately, almost, she flung aside the useless hammer, and sprung to the bell; she seized the rope with her soft, fair hands, and clang, clang, clang, went the clapper — clang, clang, clang.

Through the summer evening's air, through the gathering twilight, the bell rang out — clang, clang; cling, clang, clang; the arms never grew tired, the hands never felt the blistering of the rope. Clang, clang; Heather never ceased till she heard a knocking

at the gate, and the police inquiring what was the matter? — "who's inside?"

Thrice Heather tried to answer them, but her lips refused to utter any articulate sound.

Then, "Break open the gate!" she at length managed to reply. "Make haste! — make haste!"

They sent for picks and crowbars, and beat in the wood-work; then a couple of policemen stepped inside, whilst a couple more kept the crowd back.

"Come upstairs!" Heather said; and when they reached the landing, she pointed to the floor, and then to the room, where some tragedy, she knew, had taken place.

"It is locked!" she replied. "My husband!"

One of the men put his shoulder to the door and forced it open. He could not fling it wide, on account of something which barred the entrance; but, squeezing himself through the aperture, he entered the room, and found Arthur lying on the floor with his throat cut, and a razor beside him!

"Bear a hand here," the man whispered to his fellow, "and don't let her come in;" but Heather was not to be kept back. She crept through the opening likewise, and stood face to face with that, the visible presence of the dread which had brought her back miles and miles to preserve him from one crime only — so it seemed to her — in order that he might commit another!

Between them, the men lifted the body and placed it on the bed; then one went for a doctor, and the other stood waiting for Mrs. Dudley, who had gone groping after a light.

She knew where there were matches, and she soon

found a candle; and when she had lighted it, she returned, and, bravely enough, looked on the face of the only man she ever loved.

"I don't think he's dead, ma'am," said the policeman, with a rough sympathy. "I have been trying to stop the bleeding; and, if you will give me some more handkerchiefs, I'll see what we can do till the doctor comes."

Mechanically, almost, Heather gave him what he asked for. Even in the midst of this tremendous sorrow, she could not shut out the memory of all those upheaped shavings, soaked in oil — of all, perhaps, those terrible men, now they were free of the premises, might discover.

If he were dead, he had left it all — the shame, the discovery, the punishment behind; but if he were not dead, and that detection then took place?

Had it not been for the fact of the door being secured inside, the man would have begun to suspect strange things of Heather; her manner was so singular, so wandering, so incomprehensible.

"Do you know how this happened?" he asked.

"He went mad, I think," she answered. "I am sure he was mad; he has been odd, and unlike himself for some time;" and then she began to sob convulsively.

"Come, come, ma'am, you must not give way like this, you know," said the doctor, who just then entered the apartment. "Take charge of her, will you?" he added, to a person who followed him in, "and don't allow her to come back here at present. There, ma'am, pray go with this gentleman; we'll see to whatever is necessary; you will only be in our way."

"That it quite true, Mrs. Dudley," said a familiar voice, tenderly and pityingly, and, at the sound of it, Heather looked up.

"Oh! Mr. Croft," she cried, at sight of his dark face, bent down towards her with an ineffable compassion; "thank God — thank God for this!" and, clinging to his arm, she rather took him, than he her, out of the apartment, and into one of the lower rooms, where her first prayer was that "he would keep the people out — keep them away — till she had told him everything — ev-e-ry thing!"

In a few minutes, Douglas Croft was in possession of the facts of the case, so far as Heather herself was cognisant of them, but his clear head saw farther than she had been able to do. He understood there must be some cause for this sudden freak of madness — some reason why Arthur wished the place destroyed.

"And we shall have to find out the reason before morning," he said. "Now, Mrs. Dudley, may I depend upon your calmness — may I be certain of your assistance? There has evidently been more than life involved in this matter, and we must sift it thoroughly to the bottom. I suppose I may examine any papers I find upstairs? Pray remain here for the present; I shall be back again directly."

It was no very difficult undertaking for a man like Douglas Croft to satisfy the police that anything which had happened in Lukin's factory during the course of the last few hours was perfectly correct, and in the ordinary course of every-day events, and that the only plan now to be adopted was to send for a locksmith, have a new fastening put upon the gates, and the

needful repairs in the woodwork effected without delay.

Neither did he experience any greater trouble in making the doctor understand that there was something which had preceded the attempt at suicide, and which it was desirable on all accounts to attribute to temporary insanity.

"Whether he live or die," finished Mr. Croft, "and, in my opinion, it matters very little which he does, this freak must be regarded as that of a lunatic. Meantime, if you have no objection to meeting my friend Mr. Rymner Henry, I think it might be a satisfaction to Mrs. Dudley to know you have had a consultation."

In reply to which speech, Doctor Milworth, bowing low, expressed himself to the effect, that he had no objection whatever to meeting Mr. Henry — that he should like to meet him, in fact, which may seem the less astonishing, perhaps, when it is explained, that during the entire time Doctor Milworth took charge of the case, he was in the habit of going about among his other patients, watch in hand, and casually remarking he was rather in a hurry to-day, because he had to meet Mr. Rymner Henry at a quarter past two, or a quarter to five, or four precisely, according to the hour mentioned by that celebrated surgeon, "in consultation on a most important case."

Why Mr. Croft considered it necessary to send for further advice, he himself perhaps could not very clearly have told, for he knew that if Arthur Dudley were to live, Dr. Milworth had done everything which could be done towards compassing that object. Possibly he might have some idea of thereby winning the

doctor's greater confidence, ensuring his greater secrecy, for already Douglas Croft held in his hand a letter which he believed would prove a clue to all this mystery.

It was from Mr. Lukin, stating that on the 23rd he should be in London to *inspect the books.*

"That is the secret, then," thought Douglas Croft; "before you inspect the books, though, Mr. Lukin, I will take a look at them myself. I do not think there will be much difficulty in unravelling the skein; I am greatly mistaken if he possessed brains sufficient to cook his accounts, and perhaps for that very reason he may have got them into a confounded mess."

When Mr. Croft, however, tried to pass into the office he failed to do so, by reason of the piles of shavings and other combustible materials which stopped the entrance.

"I want a reliable man, Mrs. Dudley," he said, returning to her; "a man who can be trusted to hold his tongue, if he be paid for doing so. Is there amongst the workpeople such a treasure to be found?"

"Yes," she answered; "Morrison. I am certain we may trust him."

"Where is he to be found?" asked her friend.

"I do not know his address, though I could find my way to his house. I will go and fetch him this moment."

"I will accompany you," he said; but next moment, remembering some one in the Dudley interest ought to remain on the premises, he stood perplexed and silent, while Heather said, —

"I am not afraid of going. Do you think, after to-night, any small thing will ever frighten me again?"

"Poor child, poor child," he murmured, "what a life yours has been!"

"Don't pity me," she said; "do not, or my heart will break; it feels almost breaking as it is, and a kind word chokes me. I will go for Morrison; I will go at once."

There was no help for it; so he went with her as far as the gate and watched her while she flitted away along the street — watched her till she turned a corner and was lost to view.

Then he went upstairs again to hear how the patient was doing, and after a chat with the doctor and nurse, for whom the doctor had sent, walked down to the gates again, and waited till Heather entered, bringing Morrison with her.

"A nice business this!" remarked Mr. Croft, when Mrs. Dudley had left the two men standing together in the yard; "a nice business it might have turned out. Where could your eyes have been not to see Mr. Dudley was as mad as a March hare when you left off work? If it had not been for Mrs. Dudley, there would have been a fine bonfire here to-night."

"Well, sir, my mind did misgive me," was the reply; "and more especially along of these here shavings. I told Mr. Dudley they were not safe stowed away in that there carpenter's shop, with the gas escaping like anything. I wanted to have them cleared out, and offered to wait and see it properly done, but he said he wanted to go out and could not have them moved till Monday. He looked real down wild when he said it, and my mind misgave me; but I never thought of him trying such a start as this."

"Mr. Lukin will be here on Monday, and you can

tell him all about it, just as it happened," said Mr. Croft; "but don't let the men get hold of his having tried to fire the place. It would not be pleasant for poor Mrs. Dudley."

"Which a real lady is," finished Morrison; "many a time I was sorry to see her here, so unsuitable it seemed. Never fear, sir, nobody shall hear the story from me, not even Mr. Lukin. I need not tell him Mrs. Dudley came for me; and when we get these things out of the way, and the place to rights a bit, no one need be any the wiser."

"And, as I cannot find any of the keys, I will take the books in for security, if you will hand them to me," said Mr. Croft. And so he had the books carried across the yard and placed on the dining-room table, where in five minutes he discovered the deficiency.

"If I can only now open the safe, we may snap our fingers at Mr. Lukin," thought Heather's friend, as he closed the books and shut in the record of the borrowed money which had almost overturned Arthur's reason.

Then he sought Mrs. Dudley, who was seated in an arm-chair, resting her head on both hands. And before her on the table lay a little locket, which Mr. Croft recognised as having been taken from the poor broken creature who, still hanging between life and death, was quiet enough upstairs — quiet enough and low enough to have contented his enemy, if he had one.

"You are very ill, I fear," Mr. Croft said, in that almost caressing tone which had won its way to Bessie's heart in the sunshiny days that seemed now so far —

so far away. He had two natures, this man, who had loved the girl so passionately and deceived her so grossly: one tender and compassionate, the other reckless and cynical. "You are very ill, I fear; in the press of other matters you have been neglected. Let me see to you now a little — what is there you can have, likely to do you any good?"

"I do not know," she answered. "I have been upstairs and seen him. Oh! Mr. Croft, what are the chances of his recovery? tell me the truth. It is not likely the doctor would be frank with me."

"I think it greatly depends on his being kept quiet; there is nothing now that ought to distress or worry him. I have discovered the cause of all this misery; it is a very trifling cause indeed which has produced such results."

"Is it?" she lifted her head for a moment as she said this, and looked into Mr. Croft's face, then her glance wandered towards the locket. He could not quite comprehend her.

"A mere trifle," he repeated; and then he told her all. He thought it best to do this — better that she should understand the whole of the circumstances clearly, so as to be able to comprehend exactly how he intended setting the affair straight.

"And I had that money of yours in the house all the time," Heather said, with that weary, weary look in her face which seemed to Mr. Croft worse than the most violent sorrow — "what you gave me, you know, to keep — for — Bessie!"

The last word was spoken more like an exclamation than as though it had belonged in any way to the previous part of the sentence; and Mr. Croft,

following the direction of her eyes, beheld the door closed hurriedly, and heard the rustle of a dress in the passage.

In a moment he was out in the hall, and had caught the retreating figure.

"Bessie!" he cried; "Bessie — Bessie! don't go! I will leave, if you object to my staying here, but we can both help Mrs. Dudley. See, I will not follow you in!"

She covered her face with the corner of her shawl, covered it that he might not even look upon her, and passed back into the parlour without a word. "Heather, my darling, what is this?" she asked. "Morrison came round for me, but could only give the most confused account of what had happened. Tell me, love — tell me all; don't sit looking at me like that, but speak, dear; what is it?" And she crouched down on the ground, and, winding her arms round Heather's neck, drew the dear face close to her own. "What is this trouble, sweet?" she persisted; but the only answer Heather could make was — "Oh! Bessie — oh! Bessie," as she held the locket towards her, moaning, moaning all the while.

"Do you wish me to open it?" Bessie inquired; and Heather made a gesture of assent. She had always been a little jealous, and now she was afraid to reveal, with her own hands, the secret it contained. And yet she longed to know — was it portrait or hair — was it an old love-token, or a more recent souvenir which her husband had worn next his heart, next where she ought to have been alone? God keep us all from hard and hasty and suspicious judgments. With the man upstairs hovering between life and

death, Heather still could not help misjudging him. Worse than the whole of the long ordeal she had passed through was the sight of that golden trifle, which she dared not examine, which Bessie first turned over and then opened, holding it up to the light as she did so.

There was a scrap of hair in it — a tiny curl of golden red, and "Lally" engraved in black letters round the edge.

"Where did you get this, Heather?" she inquired.

"He wore it," Heather answered.

"He! Oh! poor — poor Arthur!" and the tears poured from Bessie's eyes as she looked upon the trinket. She had never thought to like Arthur greatly, or to be sorry for him over much; but now it seemed to her, thinking of the tragedy which had just been enacted, that no one had ever quite understood him, ever imagined it possible Arthur should find out his error, and try to repair it too late — too late!

"Why do you say 'Poor Arthur?'" Heather broke forth, passionately; "why do you not pity me, finding out, after all, he was wearing next his heart a love-token from that woman — that bad, cruel —"

"Hush, Heather! hush — hush!" and Bessie put the open locket into her friend's hand. "See what it really is — not what you imagine at all."

Incredulously almost, Heather did as she was requested; then "Lally — Lally!" said the bereaved mother; "Lally, Lally!" and she covered the locket with hungry kisses.

"I have passed through the bitterness of death to-night, Bessie!" she exclaimed, at length. "I think it must be near morning now."

CHAPTER XIX.

Sunset at Berrie Down.

It was near morning; but before that new time full of hope, and joy, and promise, dawned upon her life, there came a period of blessed unconsciousness, during which Heather Dudley lay ignorant of all passing events.

How Arthur came back from the valley of the shadow — how the management of their affairs was taken by stronger and abler hands than any which had hitherto touched them — how everything was made right with Mr. Lukin, and gossip silenced, and ill-nature refuted, she did not know until the long fever was over — until, seated again beside one of the windows of that pleasant drawing-room at Berrie Down, she could have fancied the events I have tried in this story to chronicle were all parts and portions of some unpleasant dream — of some weary attack of delirium.

For they were once more in the old house which Mr. Croft had purchased when it was for sale, and the management of which he had offered through his agent first to Arthur, and then to Alick.

"And, had I known who my real master was," said that young gentleman, "I never would have accepted the post."

"Are you sorry you were ignorant?" asked Mr. Croft, with a smile, glancing towards Heather.

"No — oh, no!" was the quick reply; for every

one now knew, that when Mr. Croft appeared so opportunely in Silk Street, he was coming to tell Mrs. Dudley of his wife's death — coming to say, that if Bessie would only accept him, he would make reparation — he would prove his repentance.

There was not a relation he had in the world who opposed his decision — not one who, hearing the full details of that sad story, urged a word against the girl whom he desired, after a due interval, to make his wife.

All the reluctance was with Bessie — all the difficulty he experienced lay in her disinclination to speak to him, or listen to his suit.

"Her child," she said to Heather, "would be looked down on." Her child who, now chattering his first intelligible sentences, ran through the gardens at Berrie Down, making that sound of young life about the place which is always so pleasant to hear.

But there was hope for the suitor, nevertheless. In due time, Heather promised to take up his cause.

"I will talk to her when I get strong," she said to Mr. Croft; and with that assurance he rested satisfied.

As for Mrs. Poole Seymour, she was quite enthusiastic about the affair.

"My dear," she declared, "you must not be cruel. You ought to be the first to forgive him, since it was your pretty face led him so far astray; and as for your child — the estate is not entailed — what matter? besides, Mr. Stewart is *so* rich, and has taken to you so immensely!"

Which was true. Mr. Stewart was delighted with Bessie, and perhaps even more delighted with her child — a fine, sturdy young fellow, who, riding

on Nep, encountered Mr. Stewart one day in Berrie Down.

"What is your name, my little man?" asked the bachelor, stopping him and his nurse, Priscilla.

"Mamma says, I'm a young Turk," was the answer. "What's yours?"

"Oh! I'm an old Turk!" replied Mr. Stewart; whereupon the child burst out laughing; and, striking Nep with his heels, the dog broke into a sling-trot and bore Master Douglas off to Berrie Down.

"He only told you the truth, sir," said Priscilla, before she started off in pursuit; "he's an awful young Turk."

In due time, Mr. Stewart reached the Hollow, where he found Lord Kemms, who was decidedly smitten by Agnes; and they all spent the evening talking quietly together while the sun sank into the west, and bathed the whole country lying exposed to his beams in a glory of crimson and purple and gold.

"I have brought you a little present, Heather," Mr. Stewart said, drawing near the sofa she occupied. "It is the custom for god-fathers to give their god-children little presents occasionally, and I fear I have been somewhat neglectful of you. Open it when I am gone," and he slipped a parcel into her hand.

But Heather, with a pretty wilfulness, opened it at once, and drawing out the parchments it contained, found them to be the title-deeds of Berrie Down.

"Yours, my dear," said Mr. Stewart, "to have and to hold for ever."

"Arthur, Arthur!" she cried; and Arthur, looking still white and worn, came towards his wife, who put the

papers into his hand, saying, "See, love, what Mr. Stewart has given me!"

"Only remember, Mr. Dudley, we must have no speculating; you must keep it intact for your son," remarked Mr. Stewart, in answer to which Arthur took his wife's hand in his, murmuring, "So help me God!"

Before the sun quite set, Heather drew a shawl round her, and, leaving the pleasant company, passed out on to the lawn, and wandered away towards the Hollow.

"She is thinking of Lally," Alick whispered to Arthur; and Arthur, following his wife, prayed and begged of her not to grieve for the child that was no more.

"Heather," he said, humbly, "I have been but a poor husband to you; but I will try in the future, to be 'better to you than many children.' Do not fret, love, do not fret."

But Heather was not fretting. She felt now that her darling was where she could see continually the face of "Our Father which is in Heaven."

THE END.

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